

OECD Country Note

Early Childhood Education and Care Policy

in

Finland

February 2001

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Thematic Review

1. This Country Note forms part of the OECD *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy*, a project launched by the OECD's Education Committee in March 1998. The impetus for the project came from the 1996 Ministerial meeting, *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All*. The Ministers assigned a high priority to the goal of improving access and quality in early childhood education, in partnership with families, so as to strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning (OECD, 1996). The goal of the review is to provide cross-national, comparative information to help improve policy-making in early childhood education and care in all OECD countries.

2. Finland is one of the twelve countries participating in the review between 1998 and 2000. The others are Australia, Belgium (Flemish and French Communities), Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. These countries provide a wide range of social, economic and political systems, differing value assumptions and varied policy approaches towards the care and education of young children.

3. The review covers children from birth to compulsory school age and includes the transition period into primary schooling. In order to examine thoroughly what children experience in the first years of life, the review has adopted a broad, holistic approach to study early childhood policy and provision. To that end, consideration has been given to the roles of families, communities and other environmental influences on children's early learning and development. Particular emphasis has been laid on aspects concerning quality, access and equity, with an emphasis on policy development in the following areas: regulations; staffing; programme content and implementation; family involvement and support; funding and financing.

4. As part of the review process, each country hosts a Review Team for an intensive case study visit. After each country visit, the OECD produces a short Country Note that draws together background materials and the Review Team's observations. The present report for Finland will be one input into the final OECD Comparative Report that will provide a review and analysis of ECEC (early childhood education and care) policy in all twelve countries participating in the review.

Finland's participation in the Review

5. The Review Team visit to Finland - the eleventh country to be visited - took place from 17-26 May 2000. Prior to the visit, a Background Report on ECEC Policy in Finland was prepared by a Work Group co-ordinated by STAKES (The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health). Guided by a common framework that has been accepted by all participating countries, the Background Report provides a concise overview of the country context, major issues and concerns, distinctive ECEC policies and provision, innovative approaches and available education data. The Background Reports are an important output of the review process, because they provide a state-of-the-art overview of policy and provision in each participating country.

6. The Country Note represents the Review Team's perceptions, views and combined analyses of key policy issues as they appeared to relate to ECEC in Finland. In addition to the comprehensive information provided in the Finland Background Report, this Country Note relies heavily on data gathered in the formal and informal discussions with meeting participants, on visits to institutions and on literature and statistics made available by the Finnish authorities.

Structure of the Country Note

7. The Country Note presents the Review Team's analyses of key policy issues related to ECEC in Finland. It draws upon information provided in the Background Report, formal and informal discussions, literature surveys and the observations of the Review Team. In addition to the present introduction which forms Chapter 1, the structure of the report is as follows:

- Chapter 2: *Context, background and perceived values*. Some selected elements of context are chosen and described, which have an impact on ECEC policy today in Finland. These elements cannot do justice to the complexity of the Finnish environment but will allow the reader some understanding of the contextual background in which policy-making for children takes place. They include: general information, economy and child poverty, government objectives, gender equality, demography and family structure, the social system, and family policy.
- Chapter 3: *ECEC in Finland*. The reader will find here a resume of data provided in the *Background Report* of Finland, supplemented by information from other sources. Because of the summary nature of the overview, it has been possible to describe only the broad features of the system.
- Chapter 4: *Issues relating to policy and practice* outlines the more important issues related to policy and practice in ECEC that were identified by the reviewers in the course of studying the Finnish situation. Seven issues were chosen for comment, namely: the pre-school curriculum; concepts of the child and the new curriculum from birth to six years; the child home care allowance; out-of-school provision; monitoring the system and evaluating quality; the training and compensation of staff.
- Chapter 5: *Conclusions*, is composed of some brief concluding suggestions. Because our field is such a complex one and further, is deeply influenced in each country by tradition and culture, we view these suggestions as elements that policy makers in Finland may wish to consider in their discussions of early childhood policy and provision.

Acknowledgements

8. The team members wish to record their sincere thanks to the ministers, the members of parliament, the many members of staff of both ministries involved and to the Board of Education. In particular, the competence of the staff accompanying the team and looking after the logistics of the visit is gratefully acknowledged. The considerable help from STAKES must be recorded; and, with this, the co-operation of the senior officials of the municipalities, the unions, the Mannerheim League and the Finnish Parents' Association, along with the conversations with countless staff from daycare and schools. The contributions of the University and Polytechnic of Jyväskylä are also gratefully acknowledged. Not all material (handouts, broadsheets and personal notes) has been acknowledged specifically, but the Review Team are grateful for the willingness to share ideas and many individuals and groups have helped

considerably. The Background Report itself has been invaluable, is employed at many points within this paper; and the willingness of ministry staff openly to discuss their work, its principles and any constraints has been of major importance. Indeed, the openness of the system and the apparent transparency of principles and rationales have been a noted feature of the review. Any errors of fact or judgement, however, remain the responsibility of the authors.

Terminology

9. Throughout the Country Note, we have used English equivalencies of Finnish terms, as the broad lines of Finnish early education and care are clear. Likewise, the personnel looking after young children are divided into only a few categories: kindergarten teachers, children's nursery nurse, special needs advisors, playgroup leaders, and family day care providers (childminders). The currency of Finland is the Finnish mark (FIM), which has the following values: USD 1 = FIM 6.6; Euro 1 = FIM 5.5.

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXT, BACKGROUND AND PERCEIVED VALUES

General information and context

10. Finland (*Suomi*) is the seventh largest country in Europe. Situated between the 60th and 70th parallels of latitude, it is a Nordic country sharing borders with Sweden, Norway and Russia. It has a northern temperate climate and an area of 338 000 sq km, which consists of 10% water. Finland possesses many lakes and islands. 69% of the land is forest and approximately 8% is cultivated. It is relatively sparsely populated by 5.2 million inhabitants, with a population density of 15.3 per square kilometre. It is a republic which vests its authority in a single chamber, 200 member parliament, elected every four years and with a president elected every six. The current government is made up of five parties: the Social Democratic Party, the National Coalition Party, the Swedish People's Party in Finland, the Left Wing Alliance and the Finnish Green League.

11. Since the reforms of 1997, Finland has been divided into six provinces (see Figure 1). One of these is the autonomous province of Åland, which is predominantly Swedish-speaking. There are 452 municipalities. These enjoy extensive autonomy and vary in size from 130 inhabitants to approximately half a million. The term 'municipality' is virtually interchangeable, with the term 'local authority'. Small municipalities may join or federate, however, to become one local authority. At the end of 1998 there were some 1.4 million families in Finland, 635 000 of which had children. Of the latter 18% were single-parent families. The average number of children per family was 1.82. A total of 57 200 children were born that year. 81.7% of those families with children had one or two children only, the remaining 18.3% had three, four or more.

12. Finland is a bilingual country. Its national languages are Finnish and Swedish, though the Swedish population comprises only some 6% or 300 000 persons. Finnish bears no relationship to Swedish or to the other (closely related) Nordic languages. The Sami (Lappish) language, in several forms, is also spoken in the north by some 1 700, or more, of the 7 000 Sami people there. Other minorities include the Romany, of whom there are about 10 000. Immigrants represent about 150 nationalities in Finland, though the numbers are relatively small, with some 85 000 forming the main bulk from ten countries. Positioned politically and economically in Scandinavia and Europe, Finland's people have an impressive grasp of several languages, with English dominating as the third most preferred language and appearing often as the language of much trade and commerce.

Economy and child poverty

13. After undergoing a fairly severe economic recession in the early 1990s, Finland has recovered well and, despite major adjustments and reductions in services, its strong social welfare commitment seems largely intact. The current (2000) economy is robust and growing steadily. Major sectors of the economy are now: services 60%; manufacturing industry and construction 35%; agriculture and forestry 5%. The unemployment level reached some 16.6% in the mid-1990s, but has now dropped to about 8%, though it is still high in the under 25 year age group in comparison with other EU countries. In 1998, the average gross wage and salary was some FIM 11 300 per month. The disposable income of households for the same year was some FIM 67 900; and the overall rate of taxation (as a proportion of the GDP) was 47%.

14. Because of the strengths of the social security system, levels of child poverty have remained very low (4.6%), placing Finland, with its Nordic neighbours, among the OECD countries which best cater for child and family needs (UNICEF, 2000). The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has had traditionally the largest budget of all ministries, and within its expenditure, families and children receive 12.1% of the social protection budget. The aims of social protection are seen largely in terms of family or household. A further strength of the system lies in the role played by municipalities, which are able to provide assistance and cash benefits to supplement national entitlements. A third pillar for preventing child poverty has been the attention paid to equality of opportunity in work. Over 70% of Finnish women are employed, almost 90% in full-time positions. The Background Report draws attention, however, to a feature that is a matter of concern in almost all countries, namely, that in relative terms, unemployment is highest in families composed of a lone mother and her child(ren).

Figure 1. Division of the provinces



Government objectives

15. The Government's general, overall objective "is for Finland to be an equitable, motivating, socially sound and undivided state. The future of Finland and of Finns is strongly linked to knowledge and expertise..." (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2000). An important aim is to promote long-term social cohesion and a secure environment for children, which would enable them to make progress towards balanced adult maturity. Finnish educational policy aims to create a humane and sustainable information society. It emphasises the personal interests of children and young adults and supports opportunities for life-long learning and self-development. Early childhood policy is intended to develop and support children in becoming ethically responsible members of society. It seeks to ensure the knowledge and skills necessary for living and promoting equality.

Gender equality

16. It may be no accident that the Finnish language lacks a gender marker. According to the Whorfian hypothesis, the language of a group clearly reflects its dominant concerns and assumptions about the world. Be that as it may, Finnish culture today is shaped in ways which appear to help gender equality. The agrarian culture of 'shared work' seems to have been important in the development of the value system. Indeed, as Apo also points out, because of the "severe, ecological conditions of the Nordic agrarian economy," it was often highly necessary that women were capable of defending and supporting themselves and the family (1999, p. 19). This successful melding of work and family seems to have been a feature of Finnish society for many years and has promoted the goal of social justice and equality between the sexes far earlier than in some other cultures. In short, the agrarian heritage coupled with the 'younger layer of individual rights' (Pylkkanen, 1999, p. 24) results in a particular view of society, which values highly the individual within the collective, be it man, woman or child.

17. The *Act on Equality between Men and Women* was passed in 1986 and is a key feature in the understanding of the essential relationship between child-care, the family and the state. The Office for the Ombudsman for Equality says the following,

Besides financial independence, the cornerstones of equality are parental leave, home care leave and safe day care for children. Children get a warm meal at school. There have been statutory school meals in Finland for over fifty years now. The majority of parents can also have a meal at their workplace. Well-run public transport and geriatric care also make it possible for women to participate in working life. Finnish fathers nowadays take responsibility for the care of their children and the home. This significant change in attitude supports a woman in the conflict of pressures between work and the family and enriches men's lives (Office of the Ombudsman for Equality, 1999, p. 14).

18. "International labour statistics show Finnish women to be in an exceptional position, in that participation in work outside the home was more common than in any other OECD country as long ago as the 1960s. If a measure involving the number of hours per head of working population is used, Finland still emerges at the top of the list, even in the figures for the 1990s." (Lehto, 1999, p. 107.) A relatively close relationship (second only to Sweden) exists between the median salaries of men and women. At FIM 10 172 monthly, women's earnings average about 83% of men's, FIM 12 330 monthly (1998 figures), which indicates that the segregation of women into part-time jobs is not a major tradition in Finnish culture, or in its economy. Gender segregation by occupation is strong, however, with two-thirds of Finnish women working in sectors where most of the employees are women. 1997 figures show that 58% of graduates were women and 42% men (all academic and professional fields). Almost 80% of teacher education graduates are currently women (1997 figures), though, at university level, only 14% of full professors are

female. 58% of part-time academic staff, including research, are female; and this is one of the few noticeable areas where part-time employment *is* available (Statistics Finland, 1999). 47% of the total Finnish labour market is made up of women 15 to 74 years.

19. However, in a 1998 survey, “The majority of Finnish women and men felt that, on the whole women did not enjoy the same status in Finland as men” (Statistics Finland, 1999, p. 129). One in three men surveyed felt that gender equality has been achieved, whereas only 15% women felt the same. Almost half of both men and women in educational institutions felt that gender equality was well implemented in their institution. About 50% of both sexes estimated that gender equality would grow during the next decade.

A clear majority of both women (92%) and men (87%) felt that married women have every right to be in paid work whatever their family situation. The statement that men should take a greater part in looking after and raising their children than they do at present received almost as much support. There seemed to be wide support among the Finns for a less pronounced division of labour in the everyday lives of families with children (Statistics Finland, 1999, p. 129)

20. Moreover, 90% women and 80% men felt that women should take a more active role in politics and 81% of women and 65% of men thought that the worlds of business and the economy would benefit from having more women in senior positions.

Demography and family structure

21. At the end of 1998 there were some 1.4 million families in Finland, 635 000 of which had children. Of the latter 18% were single-parent families. The average number of children per family was 1.82. A total of 57 200 children were born that year. 81.7% of those families with children had one or two children only, the remaining 18.3% having three, four or more.

22. Family demography in Finland has gone through the major changes characteristic of its Nordic neighbours and the EU countries. Large families have declined significantly during the last four decades. In 1960, 16% of families in Finland had four or more children under 18. In 1998, the figure was 2%. One hundred years ago, around 20% of the whole population was under the age of seven years. The current forecast for 2010 stands at 7.6%. The average age for a Finnish woman to have her first child has now reached 27.7 years. In sum, the birth rate today is considerably lower than in the past (currently about 1.8 per family overall, though with marked variation, since over 50% of the couples are childless). Children, then, are becoming a ‘scarce commodity’ in the Finland.

23. The second characteristic change has been in family structures. Since the 1990 census, Finland has referred only to married or cohabiting couples with children, or to a mother with children or a father with them. “Cohabiting families with children have been included in the Family Statistics since 1980, and they have been equated with families in which the partners are married. In the census of 1990, cohabiting couples without children were also defined as being families for the first time” (Statistics Finland, 1999, p. 129). Families of all sorts are currently recognised: lesbian partners with children; single parents with families, heterosexual parents, married and de-facto parents, re-constructed step-parent families with children, and so on. Statistics Finland simply defines a family as being composed of people who live together, with or without children in their care. What matters is not so much the structure of the family, but its function, particularly if children are involved. How Finnish children can be best loved and supported in a secure environment is a fundamental feature of a lively current debate that is re-examining the balance between societal responsibilities, traditional family patterns and the rights of children.

24. Whilst the proportion of those couples who are married and have children has been falling steadily, it is still the case that 75% of families with children are supported by a married couple, but, amongst families with children, the proportion of cohabiting couples has increased significantly since the 1960s. 10% of all Finnish families are those of single parent mothers. Just under half of all families have one child only (44% in 1998).

The social system

25. Finland is unarguably a social welfare society with a strong belief in collective support and social mutuality. It is a less stratified society than many and the system as whole is marked by strong adherence to equity and general social welfare. The distribution of wealth is relatively more compressed than in many western countries and (despite unemployment) is one of the least polarised in the European Union (Statistics Finland, 1999). There seems to be considerable agreement that the financing of health and welfare services should be mainly tax-based at national and local levels and that overall equity in service accessibility and provision should be a major feature of Finnish society (Lindqvist-Virtanen, 2000).

26. The social system is marked by a distribution of responsibilities between the central authorities and the municipalities. The state (government) provides block grants to the municipalities which cover, on average, about 24% of the running costs of social and health care. The main conduit for the management and provision of social services is the local authority or municipality (or in some cases, when municipalities are too small, a federation of 'local authorities'). Although by law, there is normally a fiscal and administrative separation of the educational, social welfare and health budgets, three municipalities have combined the administration of their daycare and education. Services are financed jointly by the state and the municipalities (from income and property-related tax) and 'topped up', where appropriate, with user fees and insurance. The same pattern holds for ECEC services provided by the local authorities which are predominantly financed through the tax revenues levied by the state and the local authorities.

Family policy

27. As in the other Nordic countries, family-focused social policy is deeply rooted in Finland. Three major aims of Finland's social protection policy outlined by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (1999) are: (1) to equalise living conditions between households through ensuring that the presence of young children should not be an economic disadvantage; (2) to reconcile work and family responsibilities for both parents; (3) to provide special support to families in vulnerable situations. The principle of the citizen's entitlement to a reasonable level of social security has wide support. Parents receive state-funded, tax-free, monthly child allowances for each child. Since 1990, they enjoy the *subjective right to a municipal daycare place for their child*, or a *home-care allowance* (see below) either to employ in-home help or to allow one parent to remain at home to care for their child. While the home-care allowance may act as a disincentive to employment in certain instances, employment rates among mothers of young children remain very high by OECD standards. In short, the overall policy aim is to reconcile a full employment policy with parental responsibilities, while stimulating a more equal share of responsibility for childcare between men and women.

28. The total length of *maternity and parental leave* is 263 working days, including Saturdays (covering about 11 months), which is taken, in fact, by the great majority of women. A parental allowance is paid for the total length of this period, but for the first 18 weeks the allowance is payable to the mother only. After that it can be granted either to the mother or the father, or to both. The amount of the allowance depends upon the earned income. In 1998, a parental allowance was paid to 98 900 women and 40 500 men. Women received on average a parental allowance of FIM 173 per day; men FIM 272 per day

(an average of 66% of earned income overall). The subjective right to day care starts after the parental leave period. The use of day care is rare during the parental leave period and concerns mainly entrepreneurs, students, and parents with some sudden difficulty or illness.

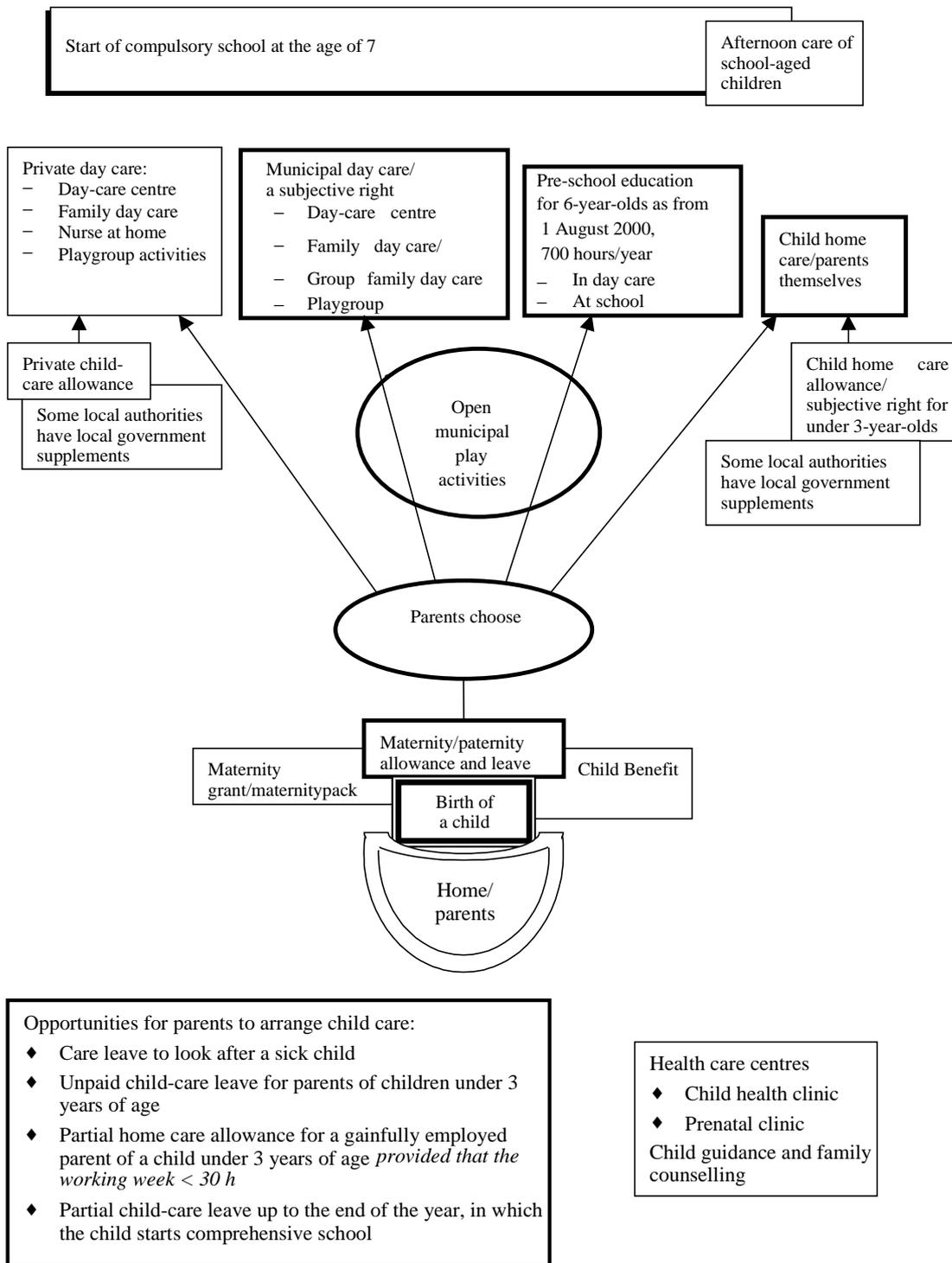
29. At the end of parental leave, one parent is entitled to *childcare leave* (care leave) from work until a child is three years old. Municipalities pay these parents (96% women) a *child home-care allowance*. In 1998, this allowance affected almost 60% of children under three and was paid to 131 200 families. Under the scheme, the home parent may receive a low flat rate of FIM 1 500 per month, plus FIM 500 for any other child under three years and FIM 300 for children over three. In addition to the basic home care allowance, the family is entitled to receive an income-related supplement depending on the size and income level of the individual family. This is paid only for one child to a maximum amount of FIM 1 000 a month. In some municipalities, local supplements are paid. Across Finland, the average received is about FIM 2 151 per month. The only condition is that the child concerned should not be enrolled in a local authority childcare service, that is to say, that parents may receive the allowance while entrusting their child to the care of a relative, private childminder or private daycare centre. Parents taking care leave for their children have the right to return to their old jobs when the (maximum of three years) leave expires. The Background Report notes however that, “Mothers caring for their children at home are mostly less-educated women, whose families usually have more than one child under school age. Use of the child home-care allowance is higher among low-income families.”

30. Other aids to facilitate parents are also possible, e.g. each parent, in agreement with their employer, is entitled to an unpaid reduction of working hours, called *partial care leave* (up to a six-hour day or a thirty-hour week) until the end of the year when their child goes to school, that is, when the child is about seven years old. In this option, they receive, in addition to their pay, a partial home care allowance of 375 FIM (taxable income), up to the time their child becomes three. Also, a *private childcare allowance* can also be requested from the local authorities to look after a child under school age either by a private childminder or a recognised private daycare centre of the parents’ choice. The private child care allowance is made up of a basic care allowance, which is FIM 700 per child a month, and a supplement to which the family may be entitled, depending on its size and income. The supplement is paid to a maximum of FIM 800 a month per child. In some municipalities, local supplements are paid. The allowance is paid directly to the provider, as part of taxable income. Other allowances include a housing allowance, a maintenance allowance and home help.

31. All expectant mothers and newborn babies with their parents are within the system of *antenatal and child health clinics*, which form part of basic municipal social and health care services. Monitoring and ensuring the well-being of expectant mothers, as well as preparing mothers and fathers for childbirth, have been the main functions of antenatal clinics. Child health clinics in turn focus on supporting and monitoring children’s growth and on providing guidance in the new life situation. The work has increasingly focussed on promoting psychological and psychosocial well-being of families. Attention to children with special needs, and respect for handicap or difference, clearly marks the Finnish ‘attitude’ towards children. Early systems of identification exist throughout the country and the ‘well-baby’ concept is understood and rigorously followed up. It is noticeable that Finland (with Sweden) has a consistently lower infant mortality rate than the EU as a whole (currently just fewer than 4 per 1 000 live births).

32. Figure 2 provides an overview of family policy and ECEC in Finland. The different features of ECEC policy and provision for children under seven will be described in more detail in Chapter 3.

Figure 2. Family policy and ECEC for children from birth to seven years in Finland



CHAPTER 3: OVERVIEW OF ECEC POLICY AND PROVISION IN FINLAND

Administration and key players

The Ministries and Statutory Agencies

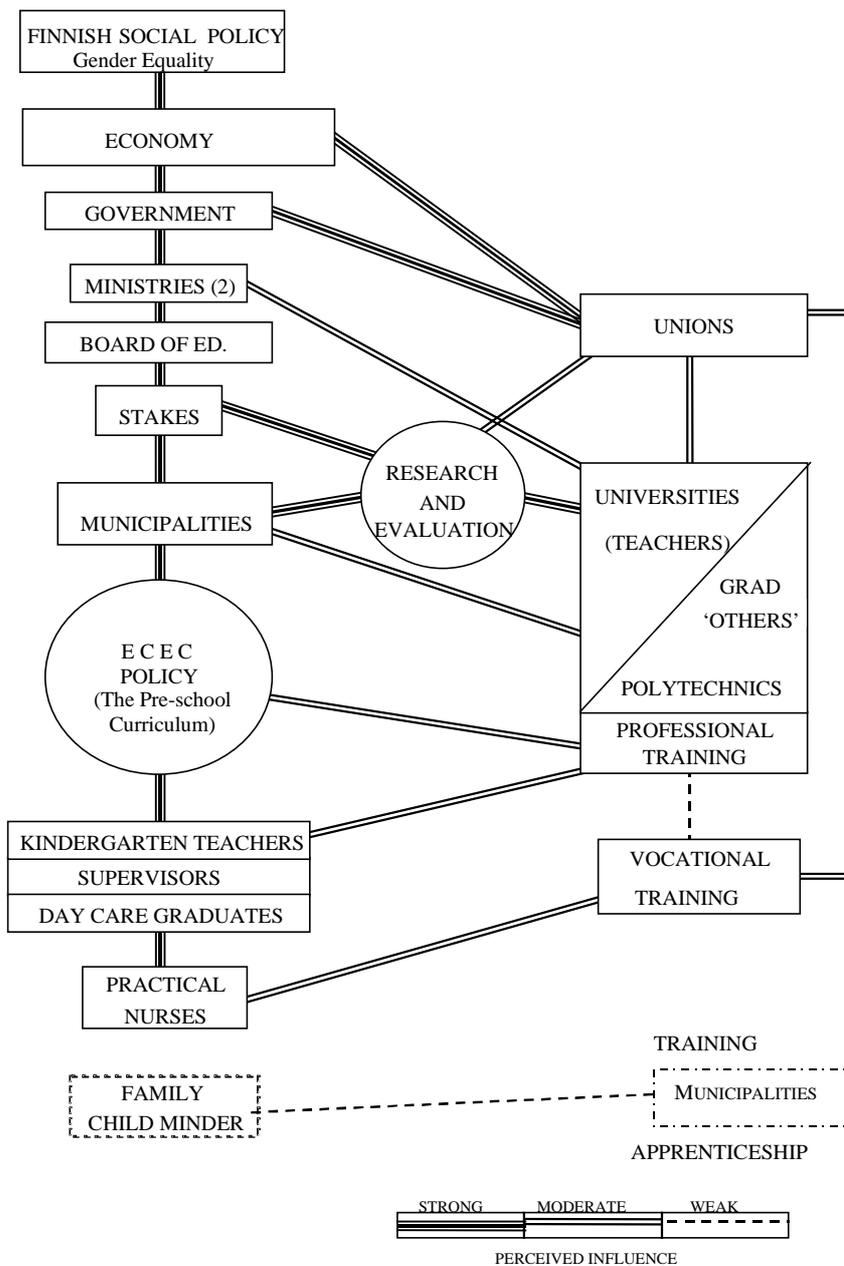
33. Two ministries have major responsibilities for early childhood education and care in Finland: the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and the Ministry of Education. Attached to the ministries are two powerful agencies, STAKES and the National Board of Education, which have a direct interest in early childhood matters (see Figure 3 for an overview of organisations and structures that influence policy and provision in the ECEC field).

34. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has by far the largest portion of the state budget covering a vast range of services (in many cases via the municipalities), from health care to pension insurance, from unemployment to child care. It has six major departments within it, including the recently reorganised sub-department STAKES (*Sosiaali-ja terveystalun tutkimus-jakehittamiskeskus*). STAKES is the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health. It produces information and data, undertakes research and forwards results and 'know-how' to actors in the field of welfare, health and education. Since 1994, two researchers have co-operated with the National Board of Education (see below) in the development of work on the pre-school curriculum (6-7 years). Two researchers work within the ECEC sector at STAKES and one additional researcher is involved in a joint project between STAKES and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health concerning quality improvement and steering of ECEC.

35. The Ministry of Education has the third-largest expenditure (immediately after the Finance Ministry). As in other countries, the ministry has general responsibility for all levels of schooling and in addition, covers much research, university support, cultural and artistic activities. The general principles of education policy and legislation are determined, however, by the Finnish Parliament. Education in Finland is compulsory, but attendance is not. There are other ways of completing compulsory education (e.g. home-schooling), but most children attend regular school. There are normally 190 days of schooling per year. The daily maximum number of 'lessons' for ages six to nine years is specified separately from the later years of schooling, so as to allow for flexibility of planning and instruction.

36. The National Board of Education is a central expert body, subordinate to the Ministry of Education and responsible for developing the objectives, contents and methods of general, vocational and adult education and training. It prepares the national core curricula and is responsible for evaluating the Finnish education system. Its main responsibilities are: the development of education; the evaluation of education; the provision of information services and specific service tasks. As mentioned above, the Board has been responsible for overseeing the development of a new pre-school curriculum (an 'entitlement for all' curriculum, discussed in more detail later). This curriculum will be taught in the pre-schools and day care centres from August 2000, and all six-year-olds will be entitled to a minimum of 700 free hours per year.

Figure 3. Organisations and structures that influence policy and provision in ECEC



The local authorities

37. The main responsibility for arranging and delivering health care, education and social services lies with the 452 municipalities. They vary in size from 130 persons (in the offshore islands) to half a million in Helsinki. Small municipalities federate in order to arrive at economically viable units to administer and provide basic public services, including services for children in accordance with the basic regulations set by law. They provide preventive and basic health services for young children, specialist medical care and dental care, and social services, such as day care and child welfare. They are responsible, too, for maintaining the country's comprehensive school system, upper secondary schools, vocational institutions and further education institutes, and for providing adult education, art classes, libraries and cultural and recreational services. They define where a child of school age goes to school; if a school is not within easy reach, they must provide transport. In addition, municipalities are responsible for financing ECEC. In accordance with the national guidelines set by the central authorities, they have major responsibilities in curriculum and evaluation matters (see Chapter 4 below).

38. Local self-government is safeguarded in the Finnish constitution. There is an active Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, which plays an informed and vigorous part in legislation, guides and advises its members, plans and supports research initiatives and produces publications and information on current issues. It associates with international bodies and with other such bodies in the EU. At local level, councils are elected every four years. Each elected council appoints a municipal board with responsibilities for the practical running of day-to-day services and finance. A chief executive, or 'manager' is also appointed. The regional councils are groups of federated municipal councils that promote well-being in the region and handle international affairs. They fall into six regional administrative units or provinces administered by Provincial State Offices (see Figure 1), but it is the municipalities that control and administer the finances, received in part through a subsidy or block grant from central state government.

The Trade Unions

39. There are three independent trade union confederations in Finland. These are, in order of size of membership:

- The Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions, SAK (1 100 000 members).
- The Finnish Confederation of Salaried Employees, STTK (651 000 members).
- The Confederation of Unions for Academic Professionals in Finland, AKAVA (295 000 members).

Within these confederations are specialist unions, such as the Trade Union of Education, (a member of the AKAVA), which has 107 000 teachers, of whom 12 000 are working within early childhood education.

40. The Trade Unions for professionals have two interrelating roles: safeguarding their members' interests and acting as an expert in their special field. It is generally recognised that they have played a major role in developing the Finnish welfare system, with its health, social and educational services. They have the status of partners and wield considerable influence in dealing with and helping formulate societal and policy decisions about child care and early childhood education. The Unions work together in the following ways: taking initiatives concerning new programmes, legislation, plans; taking part in official and other working groups; issuing communiqués, letters, reports, statements; sponsoring research and studies in specialist fields; producing professional publications and articles.

The Mannerheim League

41. Whilst not technically a 'key player' in terms of policy or the organisation of early childhood education and care, the Mannerheim League, nevertheless wields considerable influence in Finland. The headquarters of the non-governmental organisation are in Helsinki, but there are 13 district offices, and over 81 000 individual members. As the largest child welfare organisation in Finland, it works through a nation-wide local unit network of 550 local organisations to safeguard the interests of children and families, and promotes their rights at local, national and international level. It brings families together for mutual support and acts as a support structure within the municipalities, providing practical assistance in diverse areas ranging from drug abuse to single-parent help. It provides an extensive network of volunteers and workers, runs a child and youth phone line, supports the disabled and the addicted, offers a rehabilitation service and works with families in crisis. The Mannerheim League is funded by many sources (e.g. the Finish Slot Machine Association; their own fund raising campaigns, Spring Flower and Children First).

42. A pioneer in child welfare work since 1920, the Mannerheim League works for the well-being of children in developing countries, promoting legal rights in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It collaborates with many international and European organisations, campaigning against exploitation and child prostitution. In addition, it works for traffic safety, mental health and produces material on a large range of topics from nutrition to exercise, from substance abuse to professional magazines for health workers. The league stresses the importance of action research and is at present focussing on children beginning school. (The goal is to identify 'at risk' children as soon as possible and to support their families.)

43. Since 1995, a father's working group has been operating within the Mannerheim League and the League has produced a pamphlet entitled 'Every Father's Rights'. A Paternity Bag was introduced in 1996 containing special material for the father alone with children, such as 'Home Tenor's Songbook', a cookbook for fathers, instructions on child-care, baby's dummies, and so on. Talks on parenthood have been provided and there is an increase in activity designed to involve the father in knowing, caring for and playing with his own children.

The Finnish Parents' Association

44. The Finnish Parents' Association (*Suomen Vanhempainliitto*) is the central organisation or federation of the local parents' associations throughout Finland. It consists of 1 055 independent member associations and has a total membership of some 200 000 parents. It helps to establish groups, advises on their organisation and running, answers questions from parents, deals with enquiries. The Association has a strong co-operation with the teacher unions, and mobilises parent resources to promote good learning environments for children. Though it strives to influence national opinion and decisions in a wide range of education and care aspects, it is oriented more towards support of individual parent than to playing a political role in the system. This is reflected also at the level of the centres, where parental involvement is strongest at the individual level, and is usually concerned with parent-teacher agreements about the development of their child. The Finnish Parents' Association links educational and social and health institutions and regards its most important activities as those "supporting the upbringing of children, informing and exerting influence, advising, (providing) seminars and parental parliaments" (Finnish Parents' Association, 2000).

45. It is clear that the Association is very active in the general educational and political arena; well-organised, informed, and vigilant on behalf of parents and children. A recent editorial to the Finnish Parents' Association Bulletin, *Parents' Journal*, states,

The law stipulates a minimum level of education to which children are entitled. However there are municipalities that have made so many cuts in education, that they have undermined the purpose of the law. For example, in communities where there are teacher layoffs, children get less instruction than those in communities where there have been no layoffs. If parents take more responsibility for monitoring these situations, they will need to be informed and educated about developments in education so that they may take part in current public discussions (Finnish Parents' Association, 1999, p. 3).

46. At the local level, many parents are members of school boards, which vary in their efficacy and involvement throughout the country. Schools are not obliged to have such a board, however, since this depends upon the policy of the municipality. In short, there are variations in schools boards, in their composition and in their actual existence. There are no statutory parent boards in day care in Finland, as there are in other Nordic countries. In day care institutions, there may be informal parent associations which organise activities and collect extra funds for the centre or school.

The Lutheran Church

47. The Lutheran Church has an interest in broad family issues in Finland. Some 84% of the population in Finland are Evangelical Lutheran. The church is active in much social work and has called for a re-examination of the rights and responsibilities of the family, asking the question: have we gone too far in our search for benign institutions which support the child, while removing some of the duties of parents in the process? This is an issue of current salience throughout Finland. The Church, along with groups like the Mannerheim League, some municipalities and parent associations has been very much in the forefront of the debate. There is undoubtedly strong interest in the topic, and the team were made aware of at least two action-research projects which tried to take self-responsibility and care of others as central to issues of child care, upbringing and family life. The Lutheran Church does not merely operate as a spiritual and moral guide, however. It is active in almost all municipalities in organising day clubs, pre-school clubs (in about 40% of municipalities and 12% of six-year-olds prior to the pre-school reform) and after-school clubs. Annually, about 100 000 children aged four to six years participate in these clubs.

Early childhood provision

Public daycare

48. The Act on Children's Day Care came into force in 1973 and, with further additions, paved the way to the accepted Finnish position that every child, regardless of background, had a right to supported growth and learning in public daycare either in centres or family day care homes. This has evolved into the unconditional right to daycare in Finland, which means that the local authority must find a subsidised daycare place for the child of any parent who demands it:

Every child under school age has an unconditional right to day care, provided by the local authority once the mother or father's period of parental allowance comes to an end, irrespective of the parents' financial status or whether or not they are in work (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2000).

49. The Finnish describe their system of early care and education as 'educare', seeing it as a concept where care and education are carefully blended and where play is understood as the central tool of both pedagogy and learning. Day care has a very positive image with parents and professionals alike. It is flexible, providing alternative periods and degrees of involvement to match different family needs. It is inexpensive for the families using it, since the daycare fees are earnings-related, and is capped at a maximum possible contribution of FIM 1 100 per month. Personnel of the Finnish Parents' Association informed us that day care was popular and had the clear confidence of the Finnish parents all over the country: "Parents think the schools and day care centres are really ok; they certainly trust them."

50. The Review Team noted the high quality of the different settings visited, the excellent ratio of staff to children and the generally high aesthetic quality of surroundings. In a daycare centres, groups may consist of four children under three per child nurse/kindergarten teacher (4:1), or seven children over three per child nurse/kindergarten teacher (7:1) in *full-time* care. In *part-time* care, for children under three years of age, the ratio is the same as in full-time care (4:1), but for children over three, it is 13 children per one child nurse/kindergarten teacher (13:1). In daycare centres, there is no set limit for the number of children per group, as long as there is enough personnel. The regulations defining the physical qualities of the settings are stringent and result in high level buildings and layout, or in well-converted and attractively restored homes. In many daycare establishments observed there were saunas and small pools provided (though we learned that these amenities are not very common throughout Finland).

51. The Team also noted the competence of staff, the wide range of activities offered, the 'home-like, and cosy' atmosphere and the high levels of resources in sites visited in Helsinki, Vantaa and Jyväskylä. The mixture of home activities, gently structured learning, rest, good food and fun seemed to engage the children and produce notably good atmospheres. In all places visited there was much evidence of children's art, cumulative record building and developmental observation. Each daycare centre had also a detailed system of communication with parents and, often, what were termed individual 'contracts' between parent, child and day care personnel. This tool was used as a mode of 'authentic assessment' and record keeping and was seen as part of the 'light touch' approach to quality assurance. A profile of the child, her work and interests is gradually built up and is available to parents for comment and addition at all times. Simple explanatory materials for parents concerning goals, intentions and styles of working with children were also available. Communication with parents is taken very seriously, as is allowing children to make their own choices and encouraging the development of individual responsibility.

Private daycare

52. Private daycare provision in Finland should not be confused with unregulated, for-profit daycare. It is quite a small sector, providing for about 3% of children under seven, and is dependent to a great extent on co-operation with the municipality and the public daycare sector. In general, the providers are non-governmental organisations and associations. Independent, private providers also exist, from whom the municipalities may wish to purchase services. Because of price capping and the strict application of regulations to all centres concerning staff-child ratios and the training of staff, profit can hardly be a major motivation for these providers. Some increase in the numbers of private providers is taking place at the moment, possibly as a result of the private child-care allowance (minimum FIM 700 monthly), which can be paid by a municipality to a private provider of the parents' choice following the parental allowance period.

53. The private provision visited by the Team was notable for its adherence to quality and to opportunities for active 'hands-on learning' for the wide age range of children. Like most of the public daycare visited, it was managed and run by a trained kindergarten teacher. The ratios were similar to those in public daycare: six staff to 32 children, excluding the director. All children were over three years of age

and there was an 'English club', which was popular with the parents and appeared to play a part in their choice of the centre. Another drawing point, according to the director, was a stated focus on good quality, natural food with no additives. There was careful attention to individual parent/staff/child contracts, to communication skills for children, and especially to language and word games. The outdoors were a strong part of daily activities, with children sowing their own vegetable patch during the Team's visit. The daycare centre offered 'home pick-up' transport in the event of any difficulties for parents.

Family daycare, group family daycare and open daycare centres

54. Though declining in recent years, *family daycare* is still an important means of provision, especially for children under three and for children in rural areas. It takes in charge, in effect, well over a third of the children enrolled in public daycare. Family daycare providers are supervised by the municipality. The majority of providers, in fact, are employed and trained by the municipalities. A family childminder may provide full-time care in her home for a maximum of four children (including her own children) under school age. In addition, part-time care may be provided for one pre-school or school-age child. In *group family daycare*, there are eight children for full-time care and two children for part-time care with two childminders. In exceptional cases, there can be a maximum of three childminders and 12 children. Group family daycare usually operates in premises provided by the municipal authorities, and sometimes attached to a daycare centre.

Playgroups and after-school care

55. The municipalities provide *playgroup activities* and *open daycare centres* for children, parents, family daycare minders, and other caregivers. The aim is to provide a further range of activities, free of charge, for the young children and to create social networks for people caring for children at home. In addition, the Lutheran Church and non-governmental organisations provide playgroups. The playgroup monitors at the playgroups organised by the Church are trained in colleges maintained by the Church. In these playgroups, the education is based on religious education. The playgroups for children aged four to six years cover about 60% of the age group, and generally take place once or twice a week for a few hours. The municipality has arranged *after-school activities* according to the Day Care Act, but the provision has been reduced because of the pressures from the economic recession and the subjective right to day care for the children under school-age. In recent years, there has been an increasing provision of afternoon activities for school-age children by the church, school clubs and the voluntary sector, e.g. the Mannerheim League. We were informed, however, that demand and need still far outstrip actual provision. According to our interlocutors, parents are becoming more aware of the potential social and educational impact of out-of-school provision.

Pre-school education

56. The term *pre-school education*, as used in Finland, refers to the year immediately preceding compulsory schooling, when a more structured approach to programme content is adopted. Up to 1996, pre-school education had been provided by a number of different providers - daycare centres, family childminders, parishes or schools - with widely varying intensity and results. It was then decided that a 400 hours curriculum should be prepared and instituted throughout Finland. These 400 hours should be free to parents and funded by the local authorities. Today, approximately 78% of six-year-old children participate in pre-school education based on a focused curriculum. Both municipalities and parents have broadly supported the initiative.

57. The new Government formed in the spring of 1999 launched a further reform of pre-school education for six-year-olds. The new pre-school education would comprise 700 hours per year, amounting to an average of 18 hours per week. In the year starting from 1 August 2001, provision of pre-school education will become an obligation on the local authorities and a right for families. Although pre-school education will remain voluntary for children, forecasts predict that about 90% of the age group (60 000) will participate in pre-school education. Today, most pre-school (over 80%) takes place in daycare centres, but the Review Team was informed that the municipalities around Helsinki had already made a collective decision that schools built in the future would include facilities for pre-school activities.

58. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2000),

Pre-school education involves exploring various phenomena together with children in a thematic and project-type manner, and topics are studied holistically in different subject fields. Many of the pre-school subject fields form a flexible continuum with the topics dealt with in the initial education at school. Pre-school education builds a bridge between day care and school instruction.

59. Kindergarten or primary school teachers are mainly responsible for planning pre-school education, which usually takes place in day care centres or schools. In day care centres, it is common for all staff to participate in pre-school education, as an integrated part of learning throughout the day. As the Background Report underlines, the well-researched elements of effective early childhood pedagogy are not sacrificed in the pre-school year to an academic programme. A central foundation for learning in Finnish pre-school education is formed by play, interaction with the peer group, and activities offered by adults. "Instead of managing teaching methods, it is more important in pre-school education to understand the special character of childhood and childhood learning" (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2000).

ECEC provision for children with Special Educational Needs¹

60. Careful attention is given in Finland to children with special educational needs. From the Team's observations, children with disabilities were particularly well integrated into daycare. In many municipalities, staff with additional training provide support to parents, personnel, and the child with special needs. Children with special needs also can have a personal assistant who is engaged to support, manage, and extend the day-to-day occupations of such children, whenever possible, within the local daycare centre along with other young children. However, these assistants rarely have specialised training for this work. The law on day care requires that the local authority draw up a plan of action, in co-operation with parents and, if necessary, other social and health care authorities, for children with disabilities, to support their growth and learning. In several municipalities, there are working groups for special daycare.

61. In schools, a special learning plan must be drawn up for each child who requires special care and education. The plan contains a description of the pupil's abilities and attainment level, the objectives of education, a description of the organisation of education, the organisation of and people responsible for monitoring, as well as the criteria for pupil assessment. This plan is drawn up in co-operation with parents

1. We follow here the threefold classification increasingly used by the OECD, after consultations with 23 member countries. In Category A, are children suffering from organic or mental disorders (the traditional "disabilities" category) who represent about 2% of the population. Category B children are those with learning difficulties which are not directly attributable to pathologies (Category A) or factors characteristic of Category C children. Category C children are those with special educational needs resulting primarily from socio-economic, cultural or linguistic factors.

and people responsible for pupil welfare services and education. In addition to education, it also covers arrangements related to support services.

62. The Review Team was impressed by the practical support offered in daycare centres, the work observed in special school facilities, the volume of research and by the high levels of commitment toward children with special needs throughout the education and care systems. Special education courses are also well-regarded by students preparing to be kindergarten teachers, 30% of whom, in one university, regularly enrol for this course.

63. The integration of children with disabilities into mainstream daycare and schools has been the policy in Finland, but where specific training, assistance or occupation has advantages, then centres and schools dedicated to that purpose are provided. In one daycare centre visited, hydrotherapy was routinely provided for some severely handicapped children (who were well integrated into the normal routines of the centre). In such circumstances, the size of the group is reduced and, if appropriate, each child has a personal helper. For children with profound hearing loss, the Review Team was able to see an all-age kindergarten and school facility with good staff to child ratios and much specialised equipment. There are a number of such special school facilities available throughout Finland. The one observed by the Team served as a major national resource and boarded children from municipalities throughout central and northern Finland.

64. It seemed to the Review Team that the prevention of special education needs was well taken in hand. “Well baby” screening, in which 98% of parents take part, is the foundation of the prevention system. Almost all children are screened regularly from the pre-natal period into middle childhood, with some later sampling during adolescence. Further university (Jyväskylä) research has focused on the data collected, and a useful scale has been devised that links socio-emotional development with overall cognitive success. There was strong evidence of the cumulative effect of socio-emotional dysfunction and of relatively high predictive value from the data. The impact of early childhood intervention in promoting positive school behaviour and later academic performance is dramatic and clear. It was noted that this was congruent with much international research and lent further weight to the vital importance of early intervention and the provision of quality education and care.

65. However, it was also pointed out that the economic recession in the 1990s had affected children and young people to a larger extent than other population groups. Services intended for children and young people - and not least for children with special educational needs - were significantly reduced, at a time when the need for them had increased.

A special case: Sami children

66. As one of the “first peoples”, the Sami or the Lapps - some 75 000 persons scattered across Norway (40 000), Sweden (15-25 000), Finland (7 000) and Russia (2 000) - represent an important part of Finnish conscience, as in other Nordic countries. It is important to preserve the Sami cultures and languages. More than half the Sami people speak some variant of the language, which, it is believed, may have a common ancestor with Finnish. Finnish law grants a special status to the Sami in respect of their right to use their own language in administrative settings. Societal changes have made it difficult for Sami to make a living based on traditional modes of working. These indigenous people are the quintessential ‘special case’, where even generous resources may not effectively address the impact of modern economies on traditional culture, habitat and styles of working (see Box 1).

Box 1. Daycare services in Inari municipality

The Finnish authorities brought the Senior Adviser of the Inari Social Services Department to Helsinki to brief the OECD Review Team. Inari municipality is the largest municipality in Finland and one in which a significant numbers of Sami people live. This is the 'northern tip' of Finland, an area of 17 321 sq km. It has four languages: Inari Sami, Skolt Sami, North Sami and Finnish. The distance to the nearest hospital and specialist care centre (Rovaniemi) is about 300k. The population is 7 402 (1999), of whom 20% are under 14 years, 69% between 15 and 65 years and 11% over 65 years. Unemployment stands at 24.7%.

The budget for the region's health work, environmental control, care of older people and day care exceeds FIM 75 million (over FIM 10 000 per head of population). During the 90s, the State subsidy was cut, as due to the scattered nature of settlements, service provision was undoubtedly expensive and problematic. Yet, the responsibilities of the municipalities have increased, (both in terms of tax burden and in terms of the 'subjective right' to day care).

The Social and Health Department has a total of 226 staff, of whom 64 work in public daycare (including family day care) providing for 268 children. (There is no private daycare). A very high proportion of younger children stay at home, but this may be as much an aspect of remoteness and travel difficulties as denoting any wariness of the provision itself. Childcare for the families that demand it poses enormous difficulties. Finding qualified, Sami-speaking staff (average age of qualified staff is 50 years) is not always possible. Personnel resources for advisory, or professional development work are also extremely limited, as staff who are available have to concentrate on practical arrangements, placement of children, administration. Yet, the proportion of children needing special education and care is increasing because of a rise in family breakdown and allied problems. Often day care has to be arranged very quickly because of crisis situations. High flexibility is necessary. There is a particular need for night, evening and weekend care (approx. 15%). More emphasis on preventive work is required to support families and to prevent exclusion and inequality.

Maintaining the language is a particular problem, though recently a language 'nest' or immersion system has been started. Separate provision for Sami-speaking children is often very difficult to achieve, and children are obliged to travel into the school area or region to obtain daycare (usually located at the school site). According to the municipality, greater State support is necessary to maintain and revive Sami languages and culture, in part to ensure the right for day care in mother tongue.

ECEC provision for immigrant children

67. Immigrants form a relatively small group in Finland, reaching approximately 1.6% of the total population. Half of these live in the immediate Helsinki area. Because of this concentration, the catchment areas for certain schools in and around Helsinki may include 10% of immigrant children. There are no special programmes for immigrant children in daycare or kindergarten. According to the decree of Children's Daycare, daycare should support the language and culture of Sami and Romany children and of children with immigrant backgrounds, in co-operation with people of these cultures. In addition, special programmes are put into place in schools to serve children from age six/seven. The initial orientation programme lasts six months and focuses on the mother tongue of the young child, with Finnish as a second language. Flexibility of class and group organisation is considered vital, because of the constant changes in group numbers. Integration is thought to be especially important, particularly with the very young. In consequence, a conscious effort is made in the daycare centres to keep groups of children together as much as possible.

68. The Team learned that some of the daycare centres in Vantaa attempt to reach out and communicate with immigrant families in their area, but not without difficulty. It was said that, in general, immigrant groups tend to look at school favourably and seriously. In contrast, they regard daycare as less important, initial care of the child being traditionally regarded as the responsibility of the mother. Advice

about the benefits to the child of an early immersion in Finnish culture does not seem to be persuasive. Municipal staff involved with immigrants felt that outreach was important, but expensive. (90% of the cost falls on the municipalities, because state subsidies have fallen considerably over the last decade). It should be noted that although unemployment stands now in Finland at less than 8%, it is much higher among immigrant groups. Among the Somali immigrants, unemployment may be as high as 80%, at least initially.

Funding of ECEC

69. As mentioned in the paragraphs on local authorities above, municipalities control and administer ECEC finances, received in part through a subsidy or block grant from the central government, a subsidy that is not earmarked and is automatically paid. The average state subsidy covers 24.2% of the costs of health and social services (in which daycare and other child services are included) and 57% for education. The grant is based on the average costs of services and their volume, but there are also a number of compensatory mechanisms. Thus, municipalities with major economic difficulties or with relatively large immigrant or special needs populations are granted additional subsidies. Municipalities rely too on local taxes, set in the current year at an average rate of 17.67%, and user fees. Currently, municipalities employ some 410 000 staff and their budget (1999) exceeded FIM 145 billion.

70. Local authorities charge a monthly fee for daycare services, determined in accordance with the family's income and size. Many families, in fact, fall under the income threshold and do not pay fees. For all families, fees are capped at FIM 1 100 (Euro 185) monthly, and they are paid for only 11 months, although a child has a right to care for the holiday month if the parents so desire. (From 2000, the fee can be charged for 12 months if the child attends 12 months of day care). Fees adjusted to part-day usage of daycare services are also possible in many municipalities. It is calculated that users' fees constitute about 15% of the costs.

71. Some concern was expressed at the control exercised by the municipal councils over the state grant and local taxes. It seems that during the recession, the interests of children and immigrants were often weakly represented on some councils, and frequently child prevention and mental health services received the greatest cuts. Again, the ageing of the Finnish population, though inevitable if present birth-rate trends continue, puts enormous pressure on social services, as it is calculated that the care of an elderly person costs eight times the average expenditure. However, the challenge of funding a dignified old age for the citizens who have contributed to building a society is not a specifically Finnish problem.

72. The Basic Education Act stipulates that education is free of charge. Hence, pre-school education is free both in daycare and school settings. The pre-school responsibility of the State and municipalities includes the provision of a free daily meal, study materials, school health and dental care. As noted above, the government education grant covers to 57% of all costs. For the purposes of the grant, the cost for a pre-school child is calculated as 85% of the unit cost for a child in primary school. Unlike the health and social services grant, the education grant goes directly to the provider, often but not exclusively the municipality. Private providers of education receive 90% of the grant provided for a child in public pre-school.

Curriculum in ECEC in Finland

73. In Finland, the issue of curriculum in ECEC has come to the fore in an effort to ensure that ECEC is developmental, structured and of consistent high quality. At the moment, a national project is underway, under the aegis of the National Board of Education, which will lay down the general guidelines for developing core curricula for the pre-school year (six year olds) and for Forms 1 and 2 of the basic school (see Chapter 4 below). Their formulation is a process based on wide consultation with experts and the field. For the curriculum for the six-year-olds, there are pilot projects and local evaluation going on this

school year. Although content areas are specified, the (draft) guidelines prioritise the best interests of children, societal values, and the aims and objectives of pre-school education. Advice is also given about learning experiences and evaluation, with some recommendations for interrelating them for optimal effect.

74. The national curriculum for pre-school education of the six-year-olds is destined to be treated in Finland as a guidance document. As in the other Nordic countries, the Finnish municipality retains within its remit many of the major aspects of ECEC planning: policy-making, adaptation of the national curriculum to local needs, quality control, steering systems, financial support systems for in-service, *etc.* At municipal council level, therefore, the principles of the national curriculum will be elaborated into more specific developmental and learning targets, reflecting local concerns and goals, *e.g.* to encourage co-operation between the kindergartens and schools in the municipality, or to found a kindergarten specialised in receiving bilingual children, or to provide other specialised service that parents may have been requesting. Educational philosophy and aims, methodologies and evaluation processes are decided at local level. In fact, where the pre-school curriculum is concerned, the responsibility of adopting and adapting the national curricular guidelines falls on the individual provider, although, as we have seen, most of the providers are directly employed by the municipality and follow municipal regulations.

75. Each municipality develops its own curriculum adapting the national curriculum and taking into account the local circumstances. Then, each day care unit and school develops its own curriculum which is more detailed. At the unit level, it is recommended that the curriculum is made in co-operation with staff, parents, and children. This is not, however, always the reality. In addition to a general annual plan, it should include details showing how special needs will be catered for and how specific plans for each special needs pupil will be drafted. Evaluation must show that the authority conforms to the pupil's basic legal rights. The pedagogical methods followed in day care are broadly Froebelian, and have evolved over time in light of training received and research produced by Finnish universities. Alternative pedagogies (notably those of Montessori, Steiner and more recently, those inspired by ECEC in Reggio Emilia) also exist, although the Review Team did not visit any settings which had adopted these alternative pedagogies.

76. Concurrent with the development of the national curriculum for pre-school education, guidelines for ECEC (not just the six-year-olds) are being developed by STAKES for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. This new document outlines the vision, main goals and guidelines for ECEC in Finland, and is expected to be approved by the State Council in early 2001. These are national guidelines and not a curriculum. Municipalities will be expected to prepare their own local guidelines in accordance with the national framework.

Staff composition and training

77. In Table 1 below, the main types of staff are presented. Like the other Nordic countries, staff structuring is admirable in its simplicity, although differences still remain in the status accorded to the various 'levels'. There is also a great imbalance in the gender ratio, as women predominate in the field. The Equality Programme of the Finnish Government notes that the unbalanced structure of daycare staff is undesirable and presents a particular problem. In general, the few qualified men are employed as kindergarten teachers, but even at kindergarten teacher level, males account for only 4% of the profession. The number of men applying for and admitted to training is higher than the number actually staying in the field. In 1998, about 12% of the people who applied for kindergarten teacher training were men. Furthermore, almost 9% of the people who started the training were men. According to the Background Report, it has been observed that poor pay and weak status are disadvantages that drive people to change occupations.

Table 1. Average earnings in the early childhood field

	Monthly earnings for regular working hours	
	FIM	Euros
CHILDREN'S DAY CARE		
Head of daycare centre	11 442	1 924
Kindergarten teacher	9 393	1 580
Practical children's nurse	8 857	1 490
Daycare assistant	7 543	1 269
Family child-care minder	7 747	1 303
PRIMARY SCHOOL		
Class teacher	11 547	1 942

Source: Association of Finish Local and Regional Authorities.

Pre-service training

78. In late 1995, major changes to teacher education occurred. Kindergarten courses were transferred to university jurisdiction, though many of the older Kindergarten College buildings were kept. The title 'Kindergarten Teacher', whilst still apparently used everywhere is something of a misnomer. Students now graduate as Bachelors in Early Childhood Education, which opens up the opportunity to add credits and to complete a Master's degree if they so desire. "In addition, early childhood education and care is also gaining a foothold as a concrete scientific discipline" (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2000).

79. Different levels of initial education and training are provided for the professions involved in ECEC:

- *Kindergarten teachers* receive university training of different levels (three to four-and-a-half years) some leaving with a Master's degrees;
- *Social educators* who after three-and-a-half training from a polytechnic graduate in the social sciences. Social educators may work in daycare, child welfare and social and youth work;
- *Practical nurses* have an upper secondary level vocational qualification (a three-year diploma) in social and health care.
- *Playgroup leaders* at Church-organised playgroups have a secondary level vocational qualification, with two-and-a-half years training at one of the ten Church training colleges. Similar to a community care worker qualification, it includes a strong emphasis on religious development and pastoral care. Other playgroup leaders have different suitable qualifications regulated by the municipality or the organisation providing the activity.

80. Both polytechnics and universities prepare their own curricula for their degree programmes. Teachers of children with special needs have extra courses. There are higher degree programmes in ECEC in some universities. Of the eight universities involved in kindergarten teacher initial education and training, one provides its courses in the Swedish language.

81. According to the Background Report, most *family daycare supervisors*, who are the administrative superiors of family child minders, are qualified kindergarten teachers or social educators, as well as other professionals in social health care or education, such as Bachelors or Masters of Education.

The training of *family child minders*, however, is the “most incoherent of all educational alternatives in day care.” The training requirements for family daycare providers vary from municipality to municipality. Municipal family childminders are well-protected with the same social benefits as other ECEC staff. Since August 2000, a vocational qualification of 40 credits is available, on a voluntary basis, for family daycare providers.

In-service training

82. Supplementary in-service training for teachers is part of the collective civil servant agreement for workers in the education sector, though it amounts to support for only four days per year. Daycare staff have no such agreement and have to participate at their own expense, though in some cases, they are supported by the municipality. Employers have the basic responsibility, but no statutory obligation to support such training. Municipalities can differ therefore in their support of in-service training, some being noticeably more positive and generous than others.

Monitoring and quality control

83. Basic structures for monitoring early childhood education and care exist at national, regional and local levels. Apart from Parliament, the main actors are: the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education, STAKES, the National Board of Education, the Provincial State Offices and the local authorities. The Review Team was informed that, in the future, steering and monitoring would take place through ‘client-centredness’, information and research. This signifies a shift from directing the system through norm-resourced subsidies from central government to system steering through strengthening consumer awareness. Both the ministries of education and social welfare are developing methods to monitor and follow the quality of services, especially through evaluating how the clients’ needs are being met.

84. The part of ECEC falling under the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health is still governed by the 1973 Act on Children’s Day Care and subsequent amendments. In addition, the ECEC capacity at STAKES was not reinforced during the 1980s and 1990s, as circumstances at that time would have warranted. A new energy can now be seen as several new initiatives demonstrate, but challenges remain to further steer and monitor the daycare system (see Chapter 4 below). Where the educational curriculum is concerned, legislation governing the educational sector was reformed as from the beginning of 1999, and the National Board of Education is strongly active in curriculum reform and other matters within its competence.

85. At the municipal level, matters related to ECEC are dealt with generally by several administrations: social and health care; education, youth and leisure. In the Swedish-speaking municipalities, there must be a separate department for Swedish and Finnish speaking education under the education administration. About thirty acts and decrees regulate the responsibilities of the municipalities in social welfare and health. These are generally now written as ‘framework laws’, usually defining the person’s subjective rights in a given situation. The municipality then has to see that it sufficiently well addresses these rights.

86. The team observed three main mechanisms for quality assurance and evaluation:

- *The use of a written care and development contract* between the day care and the parent(s). In addition to basic information on the development of the child, the contract document contains a list of recognised developmental ‘milestones’, material on levels of socio-emotional development, and signals of motivation or of learning and mental ‘appetite’. This contract is

not used in every municipality though it is seen as a very good instrument to point out every child's individual needs. The regulations do require the development of a remedial plan for children with special needs. A new law concerning clients of social services will make service contracts obligatory from the beginning of 2001.

- *The use of growth portfolios for each child.* The growth portfolio is a record of each child's life and growth at the centre. In addition to teacher comments and records, the child also contributes to the portfolio by entering photos, drawing and memories of significant moments. Children can take their portfolio with them in going to a new daycare or school.
- *The use of a regular inquiry questionnaire seeking feedback from parents.* In Helsinki, for example, this questionnaire has been used in all parts of the municipality since 1989. It seeks to establish whether there has been an appropriate 'contract' and the parents' degree of satisfaction with it. It also provides an 'open-ended' section for responses on specific good or bad points about the centre and its provision. In addition to general data on the usage of the centre, the questionnaire also seeks information on the use of other facilities, such as the quality of club activities. Most big cities use similar questionnaires, as do many small municipalities.

87. Other evaluation or quality improvement mechanisms that we observed were:

- In Jyväskylä, *the employment of pedagogical advisors* to give additional support and advice to daycare staff in the region, helping draw and monitor plans for the development, extension and (if possible) eventual rehabilitation of children with learning difficulties.
- *Attention to regular and clear systems of communication with parents.* Daily contact is thought to be the most natural and desirable way for each side to give and receive feedback. Thus five indicators of quality were regularly used by daycare supervisors: parent-child contracts; levels of individual match and specific attention to the child; degree of 'cosiness' and physical quality of the environment, systematised self-evaluation by staff, perceived levels of self esteem in the child. For a centre to be successful it was said by supervisors that all criteria should be present.
- *Self-evaluation days for staff* to discuss the parent-child contract and any features specific to quality.
- *Local action research* as part of the national overall monitoring. Many examples of such research are given in the section on research below and in the Background Report.

Research

88. In terms of national budget, Finnish expenditure on research is high, and there is obviously a strong research culture in the country. Finland increased its spending on research to approximately 2.9% of GDP in 1999. State Research Institutes take about 16% of the funding and STAKES is one of the three research institutes that comes under the remit of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

89. The 1999 STAKES report contains information on about 1 000 research and development projects in the early childhood field, received from 250 local authorities, as well as universities and research institutes. The OECD team was much impressed by the volume of what is described as 'developmental work' in local universities and municipalities. Among the many subjects being researched are: views of educational staff on problematic behaviour among children; children as changing participants

in daycare centre situations; small children's spontaneous mathematics; physical education as a support for learning difficulties; quality assessment in daycare; the role of the adult in play pedagogy; children's play and social relationships in daycare; development and developmental activities of under three-year olds. The larger municipalities clearly value and use carefully targeted research to inform their policy-making and to improve their delivery of services. In Jyväskylä, for example, the value placed upon-research, and the involvement at all levels of the administration was evident. Research was clearly used to help inform and drive policy.

90. There is an active teacher-researcher network in early childhood and the team saw several papers and articles resulting from such co-operation. Typical were a cluster of projects on the integrated curriculum in the early years, on the transition from pre-school to school (and covering areas from meta-cognition to parents' beliefs), on intercultural competence of students. There is considerable collaborative work with other European agencies and strong emphasis on co-operation between the polytechnics, the universities, STAKES, the municipalities and various voluntary agencies (see Box 2). There was sense of vigour and engagement in the discussion and clear evidence of detailed knowledge of the international research on early intervention, social cohesion and quality. The same attitude and vigorous involvement was evident in the presentations by the polytechnic staff. The staff felt that the teacher-researcher networks were valued by the professionals and by academics; moreover that they had much to offer the whole debate about quality and professional reflection.

Box 2. Visit to a research institute

The Niilo Mäki Institute is a major research institute set up in 1990 within the University of Jyväskylä, but funded largely from outside or private sources (*e.g.* The Finnish Slot Machine Company, STAKES and others). Members also compete for competitive research grant awards. It works in close collaboration with two other research centres within the University: the Child Research Centre and the Centre of Excellence in Human Development and its Risk Factors.

The Niilo Mäki Institute has, as its main focus, the examination of a wide range of developmental cognitive disorders. The Child Research Centre focuses on the support of research training in child development, provides information on child development research and offers training for psychologists and other expert groups. In parallel, the Centre of Excellence in Human Development has a major project on the longitudinal study of dyslexia, supported by the Ministry of Education for the initial four years of the project.

The Review Team were presented with an insightful and careful description of the research into language development. Specific problems (and advantages) in reading Finnish were discussed and some especially interesting comparative data presented on relative match of phoneme-grapheme correspondence and reading levels in different languages. The specific predictors of dyslexia were discussed. These are not yet incorporated in the national 'checks' on five-year-olds, but looked extremely useful and relatively simple to use in diagnostic form. In terms of early literacy development, in many daycare centres, there are several kinds of games to encourage children to learn letters and words and eventually to read. The goal of day care and pre-school education is not to teach children to read but to evoke an interest in reading and to encourage children if they are interested (about 25% of children enter first grade already reading competently). The research presented by the Institute shows that the vast majority of Finnish children learn to read by age eight. Some of the early predictors seem to lie in the brain's ability to process direct phonological discrimination.

The Niilo Mäki Institute has established language enrichment clubs, and there is (as a product of all three institutes) a determined and skilled attempt at reaching practitioners with simple, helpful, direct publications. These are written in conjunction with teachers and have had marked success.

CHAPTER 4: ISSUES RELATING TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

The strengths of the Finnish system

91. Earlier chapters of this Country Note have described in some detail the context of early childhood education and care in Finland and the main features of the system in place. The strengths of the system are evident. There is a clear understanding that a creative, cohesive society depends on social justice and concern for the rights and responsibilities of all, including the children. Sensitivity to the rights of the child and an avowed concern for equality and fairness are the cornerstones of policy. The Team repeatedly noted the considerable attention paid to the care and education of children with special needs, as well as the allocation of considerable resources to the needs of minority groups and indigenous peoples. Attention to the rights of women and their need to have opportunities for work and choice throughout life are equally to the fore, and increasingly coupled with sensitive and well-judged attempts to involve men fully in shared responsibility for the child.

92. The balance between central government, on the one hand, and the other key stake-holders (municipalities, professional personnel, unions, parents and children) seems flexible, sensitive and respectful. The attention to 'mutuality' of decision-making is clearly reflected in the change from a central, controlling 'norm-based' approach to that of a framework which is clearly intended to be client-centred, but not addressed simply to those clients who can pay. 'Client-centred' in the Finnish context does not mean privatisation; and partnership between parents, providers (be it municipal or private) and the State is taken seriously. The range of provision is impressive and allows a variety of choices for parents and children. There is clear co-operation between interested parties, which allows for flexibility in resourcing. Industry and commerce also play a role, and the Review Team was told local firms provide materials (*e.g.* computer hardware and software, furniture and fittings) at generous discounts and sometime as gifts, as for example in Vantaa.

93. There are enormous strengths in a system that seems open to all and relatively inexpensive for clients. The 'subjective right' of each child to daycare is a powerful tool for progress, and no dissenting voices were heard on this issue. The Team noted that all facilities seen were of an enviably high standard. Buildings were of high quality, usually both practical and aesthetically delightful. There seemed to be high expectations and well-trained staff. There is clear strength in the good ratios of staff to children seen in day care and in special needs provision. Whilst safety was a concern, it did not dominate the need for adventure and risk-taking; and in several instances large trees were in evidence in the play area for climbing. Several daycare centres had mezzanine floors where children could hide or relax, or play relatively independently. There were also large play areas set aside for adventure play and relatively un-restricted 'rumpus', or activity rooms were observed. Children were free to opt out of particular aspects of the programmes at any stage; and considerable emphasis was laid upon the individual responsibility of the child to make such decisions, even as early as three years.

94. The commitment to the pre-school reforms is impressive and is a lesson in partnership. The reforms seemed well-supported in the field, regionally well-organised, capable of real flexibility, yet still based on a process and developmental view of the child. The reforms have great potential for influencing change in pedagogic practice in both directions, that is: in sharpening clear observation and commitment

for those responsible for quality of provision for the under sixes as well as influencing the practice in the first two years or so of primary (comprehensive) school. Educare is an undoubted strength in the overall Finnish social and educational system, and the Team witnessed good integration of care and education in the great majority of the sites visited.

95. The well baby programme, which covers all children from the pre-natal period to seven years, was admired. The intensive screening of children has considerable potential for informing many avenues of policy, for obvious diagnostic procedures, for alerting the public to trends, for collecting key information, including information on child achievement. It feeds into the special needs provision at an early stage and helps establish base-line policy in that arena.

96. There is noted energy deployed in the curriculum reforms being undertaken by the National Board of Education, the action research of STAKES, the municipalities, the university research bodies. The team saw clear strengths in the ways extra funds are focused to support projects and sense that this is an evolving process which should aid action research, commit practitioners in professional development and help in providing a quality assurance attractive to parents and professionals.

97. Within this context of excellence, a number of issues did arise during the course of our visit. We have summarised them under seven headings:

- The pre-school curriculum.
- Concepts of the child and the new curriculum from birth to six years.
- The child home care allowance.
- Out-of-school provision.
- The training and compensation of staff.
- Monitoring the system and evaluating quality.

Issues arising from the visit

The pre-school curriculum

98. The initiative to provide a new pre-school curriculum for six year olds, linked to the curriculum for the first two years of primary school, is perhaps the major talking point in ECEC circles in Finland at the moment. For the Review Team, this new curriculum is not an issue, in the sense of being a matter of concern. Rather, we highlight it here as being innovative and creative, both in the development process adopted and in the (draft) contents that we have been given to see. Challenges may arise in the implementation phase of the curriculum, and thus we have made some suggestions in Chapter 5 concerning that phase.

99. Since 1996, there has been a pre-school curriculum in day care and school for six-year-olds. This curriculum has been voluntary in day care but obligatory in pre-school education organised in schools. Now, since the pre-school reform of August 2000, a curriculum has been developed to cover all pre-school organised for six-year-old children either at school or at day care. There is also a core curriculum, taught in the comprehensive school for years one and two of compulsory education (age seven to nine years). The previous pre-school curriculum was based on fields of content (*e.g.* language and communication; health and arts, the environment and nature), whereas the compulsory school curriculum was based on 'academic subject segregation'. The apparent mismatch is quoted as one of the main reasons for introducing a new

pre-school curriculum for the six-year-olds, and, at the same time, for starting the development of a new curriculum for primary school.

100. The change will be substantial. Pre-school education free of charge will come into force for the entire age group of six year olds in two stages. From August 2000, it is voluntary for the municipalities to organise, but from August 2001, it is every six-year-old child's right to have the possibility to participate in pre-school education, free of charge. The take-up of pre-school education will be voluntary for parents, however, and the parent's subjective right to day care (which can extend for a much longer period than the mandated 19 or 20 hours per week of pre-school education) is sustained, until the beginning of school at the age of seven. In sum, the offer of 700 hours of pre-school education will be embedded within the subjective right to day care. The Review Team was informed that some municipalities have decided to finance a further 60 hours of pre-school curriculum, bringing it up to the 760 hours (with preparation) that primary school teachers teach each year. Current overall estimates at present forecast that about 80% of the teaching of the new curriculum will occur in daycare centres. It is already clear that the new curriculum is part of the innovative intention to establish a curriculum framework from birth to eight years. This was stated frequently by members of STAKES and the Board of Education.

101. Those kindergarten teachers whom we consulted concerning the reform seemed both enthusiastic and satisfied with the way the process of changing policy was taking place (see Box 3). There was the belief that the consultation and testing process took account of the specialist skills of kindergarten teachers, without demeaning the vital importance of the early years and without negating the centrality of play-based, exploratory processes. There was also the view expressed that the considerable autonomy of the municipalities would inevitably lead to different degrees of support, particularly in respect of professional development preparation. They expressed some concern also at the relatively short time-frame they had for completing the final curriculum document.

Box 3. A consultative approach to curriculum development

Unlike many instances where a single ministry employs a panel of experts and publishes a national curriculum, the new pre-school curriculum in Finland is the result of partnership, wide consultation and testing. A committee of the co-operating partners - the Ministry of Education, the National Board of Education, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, STAKES and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities - was set up in October 1999. The committee's main tasks were, "to lay down general outlines for developing the core curricula for pre-school education and for forms 1 and 2 in compulsory education." The core curricula for pre-school education would be ready at the end of June 2000, and the core curricula for forms 1 and 2 in compulsory education at the end of March 2001 (Högström, 2000).

Eight national curriculum teams: To meet these goals, the Committee set up eight curriculum teams, each taking on a different curricular aspect as their responsibility: general aims for education and instruction; ethics instruction, including religion; mathematics, the environment and the natural world; education in foreign languages and education for immigrant children; arts and physical education; language and communication; children with special needs; alternative pedagogies. The curricula teams have a senior member of the Board of Education as chairperson, and are composed of practising kindergarten teachers and school teachers, daycare supervisors, academics from universities, members of the municipalities and others.

Municipal network on curriculum reform: Every municipality was invited to join a proposed network on curriculum reform, to discuss and test the draft curriculum, and 98 showed a clear interest in the project. Each municipality was assigned to one of 11 clusters of municipalities, with one acting as the lead 'co-operative municipality' channelling the opinions and ideas of the others to the Board of Education. Ten of these clusters are Finnish-speaking; one is Swedish-speaking. The co-operative municipality arranges the local seminars and meetings that discuss the principles and trialing of the draft curriculum. By May 2000, three major drafts of the curriculum had already been discussed and tested at local level. Municipalities in the network can offer the new curriculum on a trial basis from September 2000. Feedback will be collected until Spring 2001, so that any necessary amendments can be made. For the time being, all other municipalities, whilst implementing the new pre-school provision from August 2000, will use the 1996 curriculum.

Links between ECEC and primary school: In August 2000, the outline text went to various interested bodies for comment. The teams were expected to finish this stage of the work (after final comments have been received) about October 2000. They would then turn to the reform and articulation of the first two years of comprehensive education. It is taken as axiomatic that there should be a seamless development throughout the three years, and that young children's transition into primary school should receive careful attention.

Holistic view of learning and development: With regard to content, the third (Swedish) draft of the curriculum reform was seen by the Team. It sets out the aims and purposes of early education and care, various principles and suggestions in the eight curriculum areas, and strategies for evaluation. It is not a curriculum imposing specific methods of teaching; but rather, a framework of principles and goals. It was clear that the curriculum embraced a holistic view of learning and development. Process, skills and 'learning to learn' are emphasised rather than specific items of knowledge to be acquired. The constructive character of cognition and its dependence on the child making sense of her own world is presumed. The exploration of alternative pedagogies looks both flexible and interesting. Matching and extending child motivation and interest were well to the fore. The avoidance of any 'standard-setting' approach to individual achievement showed an awareness of the wide developmental range of children in the pre-school. The Team was confident that this holistic approach would lead to even more emphasis on the needs and interests of children in the early primary school.

Concepts of the child and the new curriculum from birth to six years

102. Ideas about childhood and children are, in large part, a social construct. How societies describe the appropriate attributes of childhood and what they want for their children will vary from culture to culture, and from generation to generation. Typical of the Finnish attitude to children is the Nordic mixture of a non-sentimental, but genuine enjoyment of children, combined with habitual ways of granting them clear rights and a certain independence. Support for children of all ages is considered essential and natural and is built into every level of the social system. It extends from the period before the birth of a child, with maternity grants (which can be in the form of money or a maternity pack), earnings-related maternity leave, paid paternity leave and later parental leave. The welfare and ‘voice’ of children seems to lie at the heart of much legislation, and not least in the field of Finnish early education and care. Despite some structural separations in organisation, care and education are seen as indivisible and essentially integrated in the concept of ‘educare’.

103. The project to develop all-embracing curricular guidelines for children aged from birth to eight years should reinforce this balanced conception of childhood and clarify what programmes for young children should be attempting to achieve. Yet, it seemed to the Team that it would be a challenge in Finland to put across the message that child care for children under six should support the child’s development and learning, and not exist simply to facilitate parental work. In some instances, the role of daycare, especially family and group daycare, does not seem to be clearly formulated in terms of the needs of the child, or in terms of the activities and learning opportunities that a interaction with other children and the guidance of professionals can offer children. Rather, daycare is often spoken of in terms of family support - particularly when referring to children under three. It is not always clear what kind of support is being referred to or what families need such support.

The child home care allowance

104. Parents in Finland are entitled to a care leave until a child is three years old. During this period, they receive a low flat rate of FIM 1 500 per month, plus FIM 500 for any other child under three years and FIM 300 for children over three. These payments can be supplemented by up to FIM 1 000 monthly paid by the local authorities. In periods of high unemployment, when jobs were simply not available, such allowances could be justified, care allowances acting then as a further social safety net for families with children. The Team wondered, however, whether these allowances might not be counter-productive *in the future*. Many of the children that policy-makers would like to see coming early into the system do not attend, *e.g.* immigrant children who need an early start with the Finnish language, or children of low-income parents with modest educational levels. Obviously parental choice has to be protected and promoted. Yet, it seems that there may not be sufficient conviction about the benefits that high quality group settings can bring to the younger children (one to six years), or awareness of other arrangements that could provide parental time with children, while safeguarding the position of women.

105. The concern of the Team was echoed by the unions, who were worried that in some cases the allowance might be seen as a substitute salary for people in low-income groups. There was the likelihood, in particular, that immigrant children would stay at home for a variety of reasons and then be specifically deprived of easy access to the Finnish language and culture, as well as to the benefits of social learning among children of the same age. The Equality Ombudsman also expressed concern at the considerable numbers of mothers who stayed at home for the first three years of their child’s life. She thought this could easily lead to a substantial amount of isolation and loneliness among the parents and be rather unfavourable to gender equality. Too long a stay at home makes a woman’s situation in the labour market weaker, and certainly does not increase a father’s opportunity to take care of their children. Where very

young children were concerned, the Ombudsman felt that early group experiences could raise confidence and give children a strong disposition to challenge and achieve autonomy. In sum, the Finnish system tended to divide at the point of “philosophy and provision for three year-olds.”

Out-of-school provision

106. The lack of provision for school-aged children outside school hours also seemed a curious anomaly. In general, when it enquired, the Team was informed that after-school care was not seen as a priority (a more pressing need was to make the 1990 ‘subjective right’ a reality in all municipalities) or that many opportunities already exist for children to attend ‘extra-curricular’ activities after school. Yet, for many families and parents, there must be a perceived and sudden disjunction once primary school is started. Many seven and eight year olds would typically have finished school by about 13.00. At age six they would be catered for in the afternoon, but not at age seven.

Monitoring the system and evaluating quality

107. As mentioned in Chapter 3, quality evaluation seems well understood in the municipalities, particularly in those that have strong attachments to a higher education or training faculty. Directors, teachers and staff seem well aware too of the need to maintain quality in their centres. With some exceptions, evaluation of quality appeared secure and well understood, particularly in centre-based daycare and pre-school, at the level of the centres and the supporting municipalities. The use of centre-parent contracts, growth portfolios for individual children, and parent ‘client’ questionnaires (described earlier) seemed to be widespread and useful mechanisms for quality monitoring and assurance.

108. Monitoring from central and regional levels seemed less in evidence to the Review Team, in particular in the daycare sector. There is evidently a great deal of trust in the system, but it was difficult for the team to obtain a clear picture of how monitoring and quality evaluation actually works: What kinds of data are collected regularly and analysed? How is information disseminated and shortcomings followed up? A reason for the seeming vagueness is perhaps that the radical deregulation of the early 1990s has not yet been completely assimilated. At the same time, the autonomy of the municipalities was reinforced. The local authorities are responsible for providing ECEC services and for steering them. The Team was informed that in the decentralisation process, STAKES somewhat lost its role in early childhood, a role which is now being re-assessed and re-built. Attempts are being made to build up again a critical mass of experienced early childhood personnel and researchers to work together, and give a lead on monitoring and quality issues.

109. The overall steering of the daycare system lies with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. For the moment, STAKES, uses ‘a light touch’ in monitoring and evaluation, but is beginning to play a more important role. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and STAKES have recently commissioned a project on quality in day care and pre-school in order to encourage quality work and discussion in municipalities. In addition, there is the Services and Quality Unit (PALA) in STAKES, which has had a series of projects, including one specifically concerned with the structure of schooling and the improvement of children’s opportunities for learning (set up in 1998), and another on mathematics and play in young children. A research team is also consulting widely and internationally in terms of overall best practice in early years. There is also a far-sighted attempt to put the research perspectives of quality provision on the Internet and to link it to other similar material throughout the world. Directors of centres and other personnel already use computer management software packages in day care and schooling. The potential for linking data to national records and for accessing computerised modes of quality assessment has not gone unnoticed.

110. Within the National Board of Education there is no longer an inspection system. This was abandoned over a decade ago as demoralising and professionally unnecessary. However, the Board has direct responsibility for steering the education system. Given the increasing attention to the six-year-olds and the desire to build a smooth transition from day care to compulsory education, there may be a need for greater collaboration among the National Board of Education, STAKES, and the two lead ministries in developing a monitoring and evaluation framework that bridges the two systems.

The training and compensation of staff

111. During the visit, the Review Team was mindful of the international research, which tends to support the view that the best quality provision comes from well-trained staff with ongoing access to professional development opportunities. We already have referred to the high levels of initial training available to most levels of staff in Finland. The training of the family daycare personnel and daycare assistants seems still too low and, where the older staff members are concerned in particular, there is a need for serious in-service support. It is out of character with the rest of ECEC training and the high levels that both polytechnics and universities are capable of providing. Likewise, in order to meet new needs, the training and recruitment of leisure-time staff may need to be considered for out-of-school provision. In short, the Team felt that the overall differences in the training of kindergarten teachers, daycare staff and others needed remedy, better articulation and attention. Moreover, it is an issue that may generate an increasing number of status, salary and demarcation disputes in the future, unless addressed in concert with the professions, unions and trainers concerned.

112. It was felt too that there should also be more relevant guidelines for early childhood teacher preparation courses in a way that matches closely the changing needs of children, education and societies. A principal of a school that sees itself in the forefront of desirable change spoke of “the work on oneself” needed in teachers today, and of the difficulty of finding personnel able to critically analyse their practice. Desirable change in the practice of kindergartens and schools will depend to a large extent on teacher training and ongoing professional education. The Team was given the impression that in this field, much needs to be done. In-service training for daycare staff is practically non-existent in some municipalities, and furthermore, when offered, must be self-financed by personnel.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

113. Finland has developed an impressive system of early childhood education and care, a system which is underpinned by the principles of universality, gender equity, and children's rights. The wide range of high-quality provision at affordable costs allows a variety of choice for parents and children. Moreover, early childhood services are supported and strengthened by an infrastructure for initial training, curriculum development, and ongoing research and evaluation. In order to promote the well-being of children and families in an integrated and holistic manner, there are clear links between ECEC policy and provision and other related domains including, health, family policy, and social welfare. This systemic and integrated approach is particularly important and effective for children who are most in need of special support. While the OECD Review Team noted some issues for further consideration and action, it is clear that Finland has the advantage of building from a very strong base. Recognising these achievements, the Team offers some suggestions for further improving policy. We have tried to ensure that our suggestions are practical and feasible, as we are aware that in policy matters, governments are often obliged to take an incremental approach. We are very conscious too that our conclusions should be subject to further debate, all the more so in the Finnish context, which operates so effectively on consultation and co-ordination.

Reinforcing co-operation and co-ordination

114. The Review Team was impressed by the strengthening of co-operation between concerned ministries brought about through the stimulus of the OECD review in Finland. Not only was the Background Report a joint effort between the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Ministry of Education but several other examples of co-ordination were provided, notably in the area of curriculum planning. In future years, we were informed, this co-operation will extend to bringing the proposed curriculum for the younger children into line with the integrated curricula for the pre-school and junior primary children.

115. Apart from allowing services to be delivered more efficiently and economically, ongoing co-operation between the ministries and their specialised agencies will help to forge a more unified vision of early childhood and to provide more continuity in young children's early learning and development. When early childhood services are seen as the first stage of lifelong learning and meet at the same time the holistic needs of children and parents, they are better appreciated and may receive the attention they deserve at municipal level. In this matter, it seemed to the Team that the regulation that requires all social affairs issues (including day care, home care allowance, child welfare, social work, *etc.*) to be administered by the same board at the local level should be reconsidered. The rationale behind the regulation is to safeguard the expertise of social affairs within one board of the municipality. Yet, this regulation has been criticised in Finland for limiting municipal flexibility in co-ordinating across day care and educational sectors. Despite the structural barriers, some municipalities have decided to combine day care (including day care services, the home care allowance, and the private child care allowance) and education under one board, feeling that a more unified and efficient approach to child services is possible under one administrative body.

The pre-school curriculum reform

116. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Review Team was very impressed by the process and draft content of the pre-school curriculum reform. The suggestions we make are preventive and refer essentially to support measures to municipalities, directors of centres, and staff that may be useful in the later phases of implementation:

117. The policy of dividing the implementation of the curriculum into two stages, first in trial form to participating municipalities and then to all, seems excellent. It will necessitate, however, careful attention to the difficulties and successes encountered in the pilot evaluations, and the lessons to be learnt by the municipalities (75%) that have not yet participated in the development work. These municipalities - and other stakeholders - will require extensive information and support, all within a relatively short time-frame.

118. Attention to the various organisational measures that are needed to ensure smooth implementation of the reforms also will be necessary, *e.g.* new training of kindergarten teachers and other personnel; defining their status (who can teach or do what); fixing of the number of 'teaching' hours in daycare centres and at schools; the issuing of directives or information that will be of use to municipalities and parents.

119. As the curriculum will be taught for the most part in daycare settings, it would seem crucial to involve all daycare staff in in-service training. These are the staff who most need to adapt their roles and match their practice to the changed and extended needs of the new curriculum. Ongoing, formative evaluation will be vital for all staff during this period. Daycare directors may also need support to guide the processes by which the kindergarten teachers and daycare personnel 'move' from pedagogy to other activities. Directors will need to look at different models of pedagogy and judge how they best fit in with the existing Froebelian approaches to learning and how they match the skills of the multi-professional teams employed in their centres.

120. The dangers of evaluating the new curriculum on traditional, didactic lines should be avoided. Likewise, care should be taken to not assess its effects on children in a way that would act as a base-line for later school evaluations and targets. Ideally, the new curriculum should take into account the best research available on early childhood learning, and positively influence the work methods in the first cycle of primary schooling. Already, the curriculum addresses play and social development as important foundations for the child's dispositions to learn, and good linkages exist with the tasks and behaviours required of children in primary school.

Linking discussion on the new curriculum with reconsideration of the home-care allowance

121. We have seen in Chapter 4 that, generous though it is, the child home-care allowance may have unforeseen impacts on disadvantaged children, on the women who use it and on paternal bonding with children. For this reason, the Team suggests, in the context of the discussion on the new curriculum for the younger children that the role of the daycare system should be reconsidered and better formulated. A comprehensive ECEC policy supports the development and education of young children; promotes equality at work among women and men; and makes it possible - through parental leave or other policies - for mothers and fathers to share the responsibilities of child rearing and family life. The home-care allowance may not always fit these goals. In the present situation of growing employment, prolonged leave may eventually weaken women's situation in the labour market; and it does not improve the fathers' opportunity to take care of their children. Furthermore, it tends to impede enrolments of disadvantaged children in daycare, and prevent them from benefiting from the developmental opportunities it offers. Within the context of the new curriculum, a research agenda should be formulated to clarify the

consequences of the child home-care allowance from at least three perspectives: the developmental needs of children (and not least of children from at-risk backgrounds); the impacts on gender equality; and the effects of care leave on labour market goals.

122. In addition, better dissemination of information to daycare centres and parents should be funded, to underline the importance of appropriate circumstances for learning in the first three years of life. ECEC research broadly agrees that quality early educare is good for children, that it is developmentally sound, as well as socially just. At the same time, parents are the first and most influential educators of children and their role needs support and acknowledgement. If Finland continues to support parental care for infants lasting one year or longer, consideration should be given to the support services that parents at home (generally mothers) may need, both to contribute to their child's development and to counter isolation, *e.g.* through the provision of drop-in centres, child and family centres, parent groups.

Reinforcing childcare for school-aged children

123. It was not clear to the team whether the central authorities were giving a lead in expanding and improving services for school-aged children. The need for after-school care is obviously felt by families, as the volume of after-school care provided by the parishes and municipalities has tripled in the last five years. In addition, the Background Report notes that after school care has important education and preventive impacts. In most countries, few national policies exist in this field, but already Finland, like the other Nordic countries, recognises the professional role of the leisure-time pedagogue. An upgrading of the training and recruitment profile of the playgroup leaders may be necessary to meet future needs. In addition, some of the steering mechanisms mentioned in the section below may be usefully applied to encourage municipalities to devote adequate funding to such provision when it is needed.

Monitoring the system and evaluating quality

124. The light-touch approach to quality assurance seems generally appropriate in Finland, and structural issues concerning quality of buildings, ratios, qualifications of staff are not in question. There may also be room for more steering from the central level. Some of the larger municipalities, particularly those with tertiary institutions with education and social faculties, are very capable of running high quality daycare and schools, but even their performance can be enhanced by central steering. The following are steering mechanisms that have been found helpful in other countries:

- *Development and use of guidance and framework documents:* national voluntary standards, codes of ethics, guidelines, recommendations, *etc.* to steer ECEC policy and provision.
- *Judicious use of special funding:* Although most funds are transferred as a block grant to local authorities, there is generally some leeway, *e.g.* the Team was informed that the budget for the Board of Education for its in-service alone (for use by the universities) is FIM 10 million per year but that each year the Ministry may decide on specific priorities. Special funding to orient and support local authorities to achieve important national objectives, *e.g.* to intensify in-service training of personnel or to improve access of certain groups, is an important element in an ECEC system.
- *Attention to building up technical competencies at local management levels:* Unless there is regular follow-up, evaluation and steering by municipalities of their own early childhood services, goals achievement and quality improvement will not happen. This may require from the central administration - especially with regard to smaller municipalities - the provision of training to local administrators and agencies so as to enlarge their ability to use system

monitoring tools effectively; to collect and analyse local data and information; and to encourage a culture of evaluation and quality control.

Training and compensation of staff

125. Based on our observations and discussions with professionals in Finland, it seemed to the team that the educational quality of the family day care homes and the group family day care homes could be much improved. In particular, the training of the family child-care minders is something of a weakness in an otherwise well-trained workforce. It would seem that recruitment and training could be better codified in family-type daycare settings. In addition, the training/apprenticeship should be more clearly linked to some possible ladder or avenue of career structure. In fact, there would seem to be a need for a better articulation of stages and levels of work throughout the ECEC profession from birth to eight years and beyond. The team was of the opinion that the issue of ‘scaffolding’ careers and accreditation of prior learning might usefully be addressed.

126. In-service training also appeared as a weakness, depending on the importance that a particular municipality gave to it. Again, when in-service is encouraged, the time devoted to it must be taken, in most cases, from the free time of staff and financed wholly by them. An orientation - perhaps with financial support - concerning the training appropriations that municipalities make to daycare may be needed. In co-operation with the major adult education partners, consideration may be given also to the practical organisation of regular and effective in-service training, which could enhance both the quality of daycare practice and the career prospects of staff. Encouraging the move in early childhood services toward internal, centre-based, formative evaluation is also a means to improve staff knowledge and skills. This type of evaluation is challenging and demands much time, energy and good will from staff. In consequence, early childhood authorities may wish to consider the time allotted to training and evaluation as part of the remunerated service of their early childhood staff.

127. The provision of more in-service professional training and the creation of career ladders could also have a beneficial effect on the remuneration of staff. Employers may wish to consider further education as a means of improving quality and prevent the conflicts that can be caused by the different levels of training, status and pay of daycare staff. Some unease was expressed too concerning the salaries of kindergarten teachers compared with their comprehensive school colleagues. They will be implementing a curriculum on which much hope is pinned; and which furthermore will be similar, so we are assured, to that of the first two years in comprehensive school. The issue is one that bites deeply into notions of social justice and gender equality. Again, consultation with the professions, unions and training bodies would seem necessary.

128. Adequate compensation also may be a key factor in bringing men into kindergarten teaching, not to mention, into day care. Good male role models are important for children, but there is little doubt that Finland, like many other societies, is caught here in a traditional gender occupational split which, in turn, is reflected in levels of compensation.

* * * * *

129. During the 10-day visit to Finland, the Review Team had much to learn and certainly found much to celebrate. What probably has not been conveyed sufficiently in this report is the concerted admiration the Review Team felt for the professionalism of staff at all levels, their transparency and the fact that conflicts and ambiguities were accepted as ‘things to be worked out amicably.’ This last seems an undoubted strength in an egalitarian and compassionate system; and one that bodes well for the future.

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Useful Web addresses

www.stakes.fi
www.mll.fi
www.minedu.fi
www.vn.fi/stm/english/index.htm
www.vn.fi/vn/english/vn0t1e.htm
www.hel.fi/english/index.html
www.vantaa.fi
www.kuntaliitto.fi
www.jyu.fi
www.nmi.jyu.fi/nmi
www.evl.fi/english/linkit.htm
www.oph.fi

STAKES
Mannerheim League of Child Welfare
Ministry of Education/minedu.html
Ministry of Health
Council of State
City of Helsinki
City of Vantaa
The Association of Finish Local and Regional Authorities
University of Jyväskylä
Niilo Mäki Institute
The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland
The National Board of Education

APPENDIX I: OECD REVIEW TEAM

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APPENDIX II: INFORMATION ON THE FINLAND BACKGROUND REPORT

The preparation of the Finland Background Report was a co-operative effort of a working group consisting of civil servants of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education, the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES), the National Board of Education, and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities.

The main authors were:

Ms. Anna-Leena Välimäki, Development Manager, STAKES
Mr. Kari Ilmonen, Senior Officer, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health
Mr. Simo Juva, Director, Ministry of Education
Ms. Barbro Högström, Senior Adviser, National Board of Education

The main organiser of the review visit was Ms. Sirkku Grierson, Planning Officer, STAKES.

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APPENDIX III: PROGRAMME OF THE REVIEW VISIT

17 to 26 May 2000

Wednesday 17 May

Helsinki

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), national policy and context

9h00

STAKES, Siltasaarenkatu 18 A, meeting room Rudolf, 3rd floor, room 357

Introduction to the programme and meeting with the Finnish OECD working team, including: the Finnish welfare state in the 1990's; education policy in Finland; family policy in Finland; and pre-school reform. Presentations by Mr. Mikko Kautto, Researcher, STAKES; Ms. Riitta Piri, Counsellor of Education, Ministry of Education; Mr. Kari Ilmonen, Senior Officer, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs; and Ms. Barbro Högström, Senior Adviser, National Board of Education.

14h00

Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Meritullinkatu 8, Room B608

Financing of ECEC in Finland - Ms. Päivi Rajala, Senior Adviser, National Board of Education and a representative from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs

15h00

Finnish education and social policy in the unifying Europe - Mr. Markku Lehto, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health; and Mr. Vilho Hirvi, Secretary General, Ministry of Education

Thursday 18 May

Early Childhood Education and Care in practice

9h00

A typical day-care centre in the City of Helsinki/ Kamppi. Introduction to day-care in the City of Helsinki - Ms. Ulla-Stina Henricson, Director, Southern Social Services Centre, Helsinki; and Ms. Anna-Maija Prokki, Director of Kamppi day-care centre

12h00 - 13h30

Lunch meeting hosted by Ms. Aulikki Kananoja, Executive Manager, Social Services Department, Helsinki

14h00

Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, 2 Linja 14

Introduction to the Association, Child Policy Programme - Ms. Kristina Wikberg, Director, Swedish Department Child Policy Programme; Ms. Auli Paavola, Project Manager; and Juha Henriksson, Senior Adviser

16h00 - 17h00

ECEC arrangements in a northern municipality, Sami language group - Ms. Pirkko Saarela, Senior Adviser, Inari Social Services Department

Friday 19 May

Day-care and the new pre-school system in practice

9h00

ECEC in Vantaa - Mr. Aulis Pitkälä, Director of Culture and Education, City of Vantaa

10h00

Jokiniemi school, Valkoisenlähteentie 51, Vantaa

Introduction to Jokiniemi school - Mr. Seppo Turkka, Head Master, Jokiniemi school

Trade Unions

14h30 - 16h00

Akava talo, Rautatieläisenkatu 6, 4th floor

Meeting with Trade Unions - Ms. Seija Mutikainen, Special Adviser, Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ); Ms. Marjatta Kekkonen, Officer for Professional Affairs, the Union of Health and Social Care Services (TEHY); and a representative from the Union of Professional Social Workers

Sunday 21 May

Travel to Jyväskylä

18h00

Varjolan tila, Laukaa

Local school administration and pre-school education for six-year olds- Mr. Harri Nissinen, Head of Educational Development, Jyväskylä; Mr. Markku Suortamo, Director, Educational Department, Jyväskylä; and members of various committees

Monday 22 May

Day-care, care for groups needing special education and care in Jyväskylä

8h15

Cygnaeuksenkatu 8, 2nd floor

Welcome - Mr. Jukka Finska, Director, Administration and Finances, Health and Social Services Department; Day-care and pre-school education for six-year-olds in Jyväskylä - Ms. Arja Mönkkönen, Director for day-care services; and Study on welfare among children and adolescents - Ms. Kirsti Laakso, Senior planner

10h00

Hukkaperä 1

Hassila day-care centre; normal and integrated groups - Ms. Paula Korkalainen, Director

12h00

Haukkalantie 11

Visit to the Haukkaranta school

13h00

Nenänniemi talo, Naattalantie 15

Visit to the day-care centre and the school - Mr. Asko Parkkinen, Director; and Mr. Risto Rönnerberg, Director

14h00 -16h00

Health checks at the age of five, diagnosis and individual care plans; co-operation among day-care, child health clinic and psychologist; and study on welfare among children and adolescents - Ms. Terttu Mäkinen, Psychologist

Tuesday 23 May

Staff education, research and development work, co-operation between the municipality and university

9h00

University of Jyväskylä, Department of Early Childhood Education, Pitkäkatu 1 C

Presentations by: Ms. Maritta Hännikäinen, Professor in Early Childhood Education, University of Jyväskylä, Department of Early Childhood Education; Ms. Marja-Kristiina Lerkkanen, Senior Lecturer in Early Years Pedagogy, University of Jyväskylä, Department of Teacher Education; Ms. Marjut Katajavuori-Vartiainen, Principal Lecturer in Education and Social Pedagogy, Jyväskylä Polytechnic, School of Health and Social Care; and Ms. Riitta Viitala, Lecturer in Early Childhood Special Education, University of Jyväskylä, Department of Special Education. Present: Mr. Markku Leskinen, Professor in Early Childhood Education, University of Jyväskylä, Department of Early Childhood Education; Ms. Inkeri Papp, Director, Jyväskylä Polytechnic, School of Health and Social Care; Ms. Merja Autio-Kokko, Lecturer in Early Childhood Special Education, University of Jyväskylä, Department of Special Education

14h00 - 16h00

Niilo Mäki Institute, Kalevankatu 8 A

Training projects in the Child Research Centre and introduction to the studies on learning disorders in the Human Development and Its Risks - Centre of Excellence - Heikki Lyytinen, Professor, Chairman of the board of NMI

Wednesday 24 May

Early Childhood Education and Care in a small municipality

9h00

Muurame municipality, Introduction - Ms. Jaana Vähäpesola, Director of the Kylänlahti day-care Centre, Muurame Education Project; Mr. Kalevi Rissanen, Head of the Cultural Department; and Ms. Ritva Saras, Director of Social Services Department

Kylänlahti day-care centre /Pre-school (6-year olds)

Löytöretki day-care centre- a private day-care centre - Ms. Sirkku Vahvaselkä-Toivanen, Director of the day-care centre

Travel to Helsinki

The role of organisations in the ECEC

17h30 - 18h30

Toinen Linja 17

The Mannerheim League of Child Welfare - Ms. Eeva Kuuskoski, Secretary General

Thursday 25 May

Organisations, political groups

9h00 - 10h30

STAKES, Siltasaarenkatu 18 A, 7th floor, Johtokunnan kokoushuone

Group 1:

National Research and Development Centre, STAKES and National Board of Education, Introduction - Mr. Hannu Uusitalo, Deputy Director, STAKES; Ms. Barbo Högstrom, Senior Adviser, National Board of Education; and Päivi Lindberg, Senior Researcher

9h00 - 10h30

Kasvatusasiain keskus, Satamakatu 9

Group 2:

The role of the Finnish Lutheran Church in the ECEC - Ms. Heljä Petäjä, Secretary for Child Day-care Affairs; and Ms. Anna-Liisa Kuoppa, Secretary for Early Childhood Education

11h00

Mikonkatu 2 D

Meeting with the Equality Ombudsman - Ms. Pirkko Mäkinen

14h00

Parliament House

The parliamentary group on children's issues and women's group; current issues - Ms. Leena Rauhala, Member of Parliament; and Ms. Heljä Misukka, Special Adviser

15h15 - 16h00

Mariankatu 28 B 5

The Finnish Parents' Association - Ms. Outi Hurme, Development Manager

Friday 26 May

8h30 - 10h30

Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, room D268

Final discussion

12h00

Lunch hosted by Ms. Vappu Taipale, Director General, the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health, STAKES